

An infinite exhibition fills the nave: Laurent Grasso's ANIMA

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The world of analogies and meaning takes on its full scope, resonances prevail over impoverishing causality. Instead of being the sum of possessed objects, the world becomes the unity of all the spaces granted to the entities that populate it.

– Grégory Quenet, curator of ANIMA

The exhibition ANIMA by contemporary multimedia artist Laurent Grasso offers a remarkable and unique representation of the Earth. The exhibition was produced in collaboration with the initiative '*Laudato si. For a new exploration of the Earth*' at the Collège des Bernardins, which strives to reflect on the crucial issue of ecological change through the lens of combined perspectives using scientific, spiritual, and artistic approaches in an innovative way. A constellation of images, objects, and media – oil paintings, digital video, sculpture, neon lights, operational images of LIDAR scanners, scientific measuring instruments, and gaseous and vaporous emanations like flames and clouds – is unfolding in the great Cistercian nave of the Collège des Bernardins, for which the exhibition was specifically conceived.



Vues de l'exposition « Anima » de Laurent Grasso. Paris, Collège des Bernardins, 2022. © Laurent Grasso / ADAGP, Paris, 2022 Photo Tanguy Beurdeley Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

The architecture of the 13-century building of the Collège becomes a part of the exhibition *dispositif*, as Grasso views the building as a parallel universe within Paris, with many stories and information that has been passing through and transmitted by this place. The layout of the exhibition itself becomes a space of transmission: the artist envisions the nave as a time corridor, a perspective that takes the viewer to the vanishing point; and then the film *Anima*, exhibited on a large LED screen inside a former sacristy. The film is an atmospheric meditation on a concrete place (the forest of Mont Sainte-Odile) subjected to a number of technological, scientific, and aesthetic interventions. Through architectural metaphors, the filmed forest is reflected in the forest of the nave's pillars, while some elements of the world generated by the film – the fox, rocks, clouds, and flames – travel beyond the screen, creating a correspondence between the film and the exhibition space.

Grasso weaves together ideas stemming from post-humanism, anthropology, scientific paradigms, and issues of aesthetics to cluster them around the themes of vision, invisible energies, ecology, and storytelling. The eye is a continuous 'methodological motif' throughout Grasso's works.[1] The exhibited sculpture *Panoptes* depicts a bronze branch with a multitude of eyes transplanted onto a stem, granting the plant world a strange power of vision. At the opposite end of the nave, across from the sacristy, a luminous onyx and LED sculpture titled *The Owl of Minerva* gleams with mysterious light while its blind eyes 'return' a gaze to the film, inscribing an exchange, a reversibility of gazes between the owl and the film, into the exhibition space. Suspended clouds and magical flames are also persistent

elements of Grasso's art. The levitating flames evoke an imaginary world, while the cloud has already been present in Grasso's early works as a receiver and transmitter of representations. Flames and clouds – two different manifestations of a liminal gaseous state, concretely and metaphorically suspended between the material and the immaterial – drift through the film and across eight oil-on-wood paintings from a series mounted on the nave's pillars titled *Studies into the Past* (initiated in 2008). Inspired by the Dutch masters' 17th century interiors, the paintings feature flames and clouds suspended in painted church architectures that mirror the architecture of the nave. Fabricating a 'false memory', these tableaux epitomise a temporal crossing inside the nave.

The immaterial, the invisible, is always an intriguing starting point for Grasso's art, and the theme of invisible energy manifesting itself and being recorded resonates throughout the exhibition space. The world is permeated by flows of energies that we cannot see or sense without prosthesis; so science, technology, and art function as our extensions, as do various measuring and recording devices such as the Schumann Spheres Circuits – glass spheres with angular spirals, generators of Schumann resonances, ultra-low frequencies circulating between the surface of the Earth and the ionosphere that are believed to coincide with human brainwave frequencies. Grasso's exhibition *dispositif* emerges as a paradigm for a practice of atmosphere, a mysterious and nebulous medium, an invisible force field. ANIMA concerns itself with different facets of atmosphere: as the thin envelope of the Earth wherein life is concentrated, as a milieu generated by a concrete place of the forest, and as a transmitter of earthly, human, non-human, and technological forces staged by the assemblage of objects and sensory manipulations inside the nave. The film *Anima* immerses the viewer in an eerily tranquil atmosphere inside the hypnotic and efflorescent magical forest, a critical twilight zone whose oneiric *Stimmung* is fabricated by its digital green and blue palette, an unreal light that is neither day nor night, slow motion, and composer Warren Ellis's haunting musical soundtrack.

Grasso nourishes his projects through research and collaborations with scientists, historians, and anthropologists. ANIMA was born of a context inspired by philosopher Bruno Latour; geochemist Jérôme Gaillardet, from whom the artist learned about the Critical Zone concept; and anthropologist Philippe Descola, whose animist ontology eliminates any opposition between the worlds of nature and culture. A major influence on the exhibition is its curator, environmental historian Grégory Quenet, who was previously a scientific advisor to Grasso's project *ARTIFICIALES*. For Quenet, the world is no longer 'of distant lands as in the Renaissance, but beneath our feet, around us'. Thus, a task of the exhibition is to incorporate 'the geochemical cycles and living organisms that make the Earth habitable' into its representations.[2] Quenet's most captivating idea is that, in the Anthropocene era, the Earth has now become mysterious again, and then its exploration requires a revival of imaginary worlds. This corresponds with Grasso's interest in fiction and storytelling over truth, with his artistic conflation of the phantasmic with the rational. According to the artist

himself, what interests him is an anthropological perspective, an exploration of the kinds of stories humans tell each other, which make it crucial for the artist to discuss far-reaching and critical topics such as environmental change in a relatively fictional way. Grasso is interested in 'things that look completely fictional, invisible, complicated, like telluric energies, but potentially may become rational, scientific, while science itself offers us stories that could be much stronger than fiction'.[3]

If what interests Grasso is narrative, this narrative is often inspired by place, especially by locations being crossed by several stories and becoming agglomerations of superimposed narratives and layers of time. The forest of Mont Sainte-Odile is such a place of superimposition, a driving force of Grasso's fiction in the film *Anima*. A fascinating environment that, aside from being, like any forest, a site for non-human activity and vitality, embraces multiple versions of reality which also coexist in the film: the archaeological curiosity of the cyclopean, megalithic, 11km-long stone Pagan Wall; Sainte-Odile's miracle of restored vision; and the Critical Zone Observatory located nearby and engaged in measuring cosmo-telluric currents and energies emanating from the Earth by means of parascientific practices. The forest, as a unique ecosystem composed of interconnections and entanglements, with a rich genealogy of aesthetic appropriation in images and literature, is the subject of the green humanities' emerging field of critical forest studies. A forest logic is at the heart of the contemporary fascination with spaces without order or regulations that remind us of the non-human aspect of art. *Anima* is particularly attentive to non-human life: inviting us to enter the realm of the forest of Mont Saint-Odile, Grasso encourage us to look at trees, animals, rocks, clouds, and flames, to hear sound waves and become aware of energies beyond the human, to attune to invisible emanations. Everything elusive and immaterial is made visible and palpable in order to change our sensorium, to attune us to invisible resonances.



The forest provides a site for exploring the world through the lens of posthumanism, which challenges the Cartesian duality of anthropomorphism and naturalism and strict boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological. A posthumanist framework is inspired, in part, by Latour's interest in looking beyond the human, in recovering human and nonhuman agencies and voices that have been denied representation. Noteworthy, posthumanism is also concerned with the question of constant exchange between the visible and the invisible. Grasso takes it upon himself, as an artist, to make the invisible parts of the world speak. Thus, the aim of the exhibition is neither to express the aesthetics of research nor to illustrate a scientific or philosophical point, but to bring to visibility a world that is indiscernible.

The exhibition's title suggests an additional challenge to the anthropocentric viewpoint – animism. As a project in reanimating nature, Grasso's film reflects cinema's and film theory's perpetual desire to rediscover nonhuman existence with the help of technology, to reveal life in objects as they are seen by the camera.[4] Grasso is inspired by a recent revival of animism across science and image theory, in particular by anthropologists such as Philippe Descola.[5] Teresa Castro says of this 'animistic turn' that its authors do not define animism 'as the (imaginative) imputing of life, soul or agency to animals or objects: animism now stands for a particular ontology, a way of *being* in the world, whose tenets have become essential to the critique of Western naturalism, with its characteristic dualism between Nature and Culture and its opposition between humans and non-humans'.[6] *Anima* embodies the notion of film as an animistic medium, and Grasso uses animism as an optical tool to bring into view practices that challenge and blur the boundaries between the human, the animal, the vegetal, and the machinic as a form of environmental critique.

The film *Anima* creates the powerful impression that it evolves like a living and breathing organism. Grasso speaks of the film as a kind of a laboratory, or an ecosystem of its own, within which these different entities, different presences – human, animal, vegetal, mineral – evolve. Annabelle Gugnion introduces the concept of *biotope*, which *Anima* envisions with the interactions of the forest, humans, enigmatic fires, floating clouds, and invisible forces within the film space, where nothing is static or fixed but is, rather, in a state of constant flux.[7] As if recognising the impossibility of giving a total account of what exists, the film's world persistently expands and evades frames and barriers. The forest's rhizomatism, whereby it grows in any direction – vertically, horizontally, and into the Earth's depths – gives the film its visual shape; realities intertwine to create an oneiric world composed of micro-narrations saturated with flows and self-multiplying trajectories.

The camera becomes a vital constituent of *Anima's* biotope. The forest reveals the camera to be not merely a technological machine but an imaginative system. The correlation between the site and its image increasingly relies on our imagination, as Grasso renders transformation of the real forest through phantasmagoric images defamiliarised by colour and light and, especially, by the floating camera and LIDAR scanner, which create an apparently inhuman perspective. In its intervention into the place, the film begins with movement into the depth of the forest, with the camera hovering over a path. The camera's drift never ceases, slowing only towards the end of the film. Humans are not absent from this universe but are, rather, integrated into a continuity with all other forces. The film's human presence is concentrated in the figure of the actor Micha Lescot, who in the first half of the film rarely occupies the central position in the frame, lingering mostly on the margins of the shot, at the threshold of invisibility.[8] Later, in close-ups, his face shows a restraint and a neutrality of the gaze that correspond with *Anima's* low-intensity mode and its intention to displace the spectacular. When other men are briefly seen to be measuring energies with handheld devices, the camera floats by dispassionately – Grasso's camera is not interested in humans, nor does it express a human point of view. The camera rotates, flying over and around a rock, and in its flight, free from gravity, turns upside down, thus scrambling spatial coordinates. With top and bottom, left and right no longer valid, the space reveals itself as spherical. All camera movements are unusual yet similar; slow, they hold an animating power while unifying all the shots, blending them together and imposing vibrant sameness on the images' flow.

The camera also acts as an agent that responds to the environment. With its strange and persistent drift, the camera seems to attune to the invisible vibrations of the forest, to the telluric waves emitted by the Earth. The images of 'hands without identity', in Grégory Quenet's words, isolated by the frame and holding bizarre measuring devices, is a recurrent motif in the film. These instruments are produced by various parascientific practices of measuring energies that emanate from the Wall and from the Earth. The camera is yet another device among these instruments, the very movements of which seem to be affected

and even generated by these energies. The film *Anima* unfolds like a shimmering, trembling ribbon, woven of digital shots, special effects, and LIDAR scanner images. Grasso repurposes scientific tools as image-making technologies to increase the visibility of the world, such as LIDAR images used for archaeological excavations that allow 'travel' inside landscapes as though they are virtual spaces. They belong to the class of images known as *operative* or *operational*, which, according to Harun Farocki, who coined the concept, 'do not represent an object but rather are part of an operation'.^[9] In *Anima*, the operations of *measuring*, *scanning*, and *tracking* play a major part in discovering the world of the forest, supplementing the human activity of *seeing*.

The camera's hovering creates the impression of self-motion, implying the camera as animate machine. Liberated from the upright position associated with humans, the 'de-anthropologised' phantom camera is neither subjective nor objective, but highly atmospheric. Neither controlling nor even describing the world of the film, the floating camera is the eye that levitates, it is a creature of air. *Anima*, the Greek *pneuma*, is a vital breath that emanates and animates, sets in motion the universe of the film. And, while manifesting the 'breathing' of the film, the camera emerges as the forest's *genius loci*. In the ecosystem of *Anima*, everything can see and breathe – it is a universe of what Annabelle Gugnion calls 'a shared interiority'.^[10]



An entrancing plunge into a state of augmented consciousness, *Anima* offers a hybrid point of view that can simultaneously be attributed to a tree, a fox, a human being, a rock, a

scientific measuring instrument, a cloud, an organism, or a machine. In telling several stories of the forest, Grasso creates a diffracted consciousness in correspondence with the film's diffracted visuality; a multiperspectival world wherein the separation between interiority and exteriority, the human and the non-human, disappears to give way to a multiplicity of viewpoints manifested by different images, different temporalities, and different measures. The film's diffraction, displacement, or dispersal of the gaze, its multiplication of points of view, reflect multiperspectival ontologies of the forest, which, seen by Grasso, emerges as a generative multinature, a thinking superorganism, data storage, an expanded space of the in-between, a tangled web. Grasso's multiperspectivism belongs to the same conceptual realm as the theory of perspectivism developed by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro throughout a number of texts, in particular 'The Crystal Forest'. De Castro grounds his theory in Amerindian cosmology, wherein humans and nonhuman entities alike are 'endowed with the same generic type of soul', i.e. human, contrary to Western ontology's hierarchical relations and binaries, whereby everything is nature but only we are humans. And if everything is human, everything is a subject that sees the world and is the origin of a different perspective.[11] Such an emergence of different versions of new perspectivism becomes a strategy for resistance to anthropocentrism.

ANIMA establishes correspondences among the forest, the film, and the exhibition's *dispositif* based on the idea of all these elements being an ontological multiplicity teeming with relations, temporalities, and intervals between worlds, with many sides, perspectives, mediations, and angles looking back at one another. While discussing his work methods, Grasso refers to his studio as 'a thinking, research machine', and to his projects as 'machines to reorganize our vision of the world using today's components'. [12] The exhibition is at once an autonomous agent evincing a form of machinic 'intelligence', and an animistic medium capable of animating the world and the things and beings that inhabit it. Working with all possible channels, such as architecture, images, light, sound, sensations, and vibrations, to envelop the audience in a climate filled with frequencies and resonances, the exhibition becomes a sensing atmospheric research machine endowed with multiperspectival vision to shift our gaze and change our perspective.

The *dispositif* of the exhibition emerges as a valid epistemological apparatus against the insufficiency of a singular artistic medium or practice to capturing the magnitude and multiplicity of a natural phenomenon such as the Earth. With ANIMA, Grasso creates a new modality, a new ecology of the exhibition that embraces the intricate relations between sight, site, and the Earth's wonders, establishing a territory that Quenet calls

profuse, processual, expanding ... It is an infinite exhibition that fills the nave. The separation between interiority and exteriority, which is the basis of naturalism, disappears ... There is no more

AN INFINITE EXHIBITION FILLS THE NAVE: LAURENT GRASSO'S ANIMA

back-world to explore, but rather a continuity that forces us to think of new modes of relations between all beings.

The exhibition can serve as the inclusive, if not totalising, site of such heterogeneity, of the expanded plurality entangled in the thousand relationships unfolding inside the gallery. The physical existence of this expanded field of the exhibition would thus be equivalent to the forest.

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Notes

- [1] de Gelis, 'The Art of Being Seen'.
- [2] Quenet 2023, p. 156.
- [3] Laurent Grasso on ANIMA: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-z5d87csUI>

- [4] The trend began in the 1920s film theory of Jean Epstein and Béla Balázs. See also Castro, 'Animism and Cinema'.
- [5] Descola's animist ontology and his determination of animism as 'the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to one's own'. Descola 2013, p. 129.
- [6] Castro 2016, p. 248.
- [7] Guignon, 'Biotope of Breath'.
- [8] Donatien Grau suggests that Grasso's works partake in an aesthetics of the threshold, with the lack of separation between things and instead their simultaneity. Grau 2023, p. 157.
- [9] Farocki 2004. See also Parrika 2023 (forthcoming).
- [10] Guignon, 'The Soul of the Exhibition'.
- [11] Viveiros de Castro's concept of the crystal forest is also based on the transformation of philosophical ideas taken from authors such as Leibniz, Nietzsche, and Deleuze & Guattari. de Castro 2007. P. Olric de Gelis calls such a shared perspective on the Earth 'perspectivism of communion'. de Gelis, 'The Art of Being Seen'.
- [12] 'The Machine for Representing the World: Conversation Between Laurent Grasso and Grégory Quenet'.