Human versus non-human in representations of nature in the Anthropocene: Micro-essay and interview with Dutch illustrator Iris Compiet

Humano *versus* não-humano em representações da natureza no Antropoceno: Microensaio e entrevista com a ilustradora holandesa Iris Compiet

Humano *versus* no humano en las representaciones de la naturaleza en el Antropoceno: microensayo y entrevista con la ilustradora neerlandesa Iris Compiet
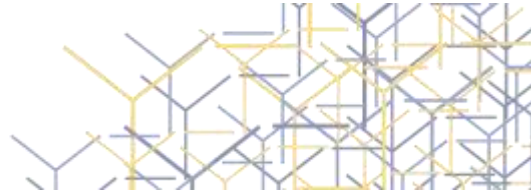
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Abstract: The Anthropocene is an era of environmental instability resulting from a social pact established in modernity that excludes nature as an entity endowed with rights. There are, however, other possible representations of nature that constitute lines of flight from this social pact. Institutions that maintain experimental forests create privileged conditions for outdoor learning activities and can contribute to environmental education processes aligned with the establishment of these alternative social contracts. This essay proposes an outreach project titled "The classroom is the forest," which essentially consists of artistic workshops conducted in an experimental forest within a university campus. As supporting teaching material to be used in this project, the essay also includes an interview with the Dutch illustrator Iris Compiet, known for her nature-inspired art. In the interview, she comments on her creative process, advocating a form of art that is fundamentally authorial, giving greater consideration to the process rather than the outcome alone—without the use of generative Artificial Intelligences—, through traditional materials and techniques (especially watercolor). The fairies and other magical creatures that constitute the main subject of her art represent attitudes of respect, integration, and contemplation toward nature, attitudes that have been gradually lost in societies rooted in urban environments.

Keywords: art, representations of nature, Anthropocene.

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Resumo: O Antropoceno é uma era de instabilidade ambiental, decorrente de um pacto social estabelecido na modernidade que exclui a natureza como entidade detentora de direitos. Existem, contudo, outras representações possíveis para a natureza, que constituem linhas de fuga em relação a esse pacto social. Instituições que mantêm florestas experimentais criam condições privilegiadas para atividades de aprendizagem ao ar livre, podendo contribuir para processos de educação ambiental alinhados ao estabelecimento desses contratos sociais alternativos. Propõe-se, neste texto, um projeto de extensão intitulado "A sala de aula é a floresta", que consiste basicamente em *workshops* artísticos conduzidos numa floresta experimental universitária. A título de material de apoio a ser utilizado nesse projeto, o texto inclui uma entrevista com a ilustradora holandesa Iris Compiet, conhecida por sua arte inspirada pela natureza. Nessa entrevista, ela comenta sobre seu processo criativo, defendendo uma arte essencialmente autoral, que considere mais o processo do que somente o resultado — sem se utilizar de Inteligências Artificiais generativas —, por meio de materiais e técnicas tradicionais (especialmente a aquarela). As fadas e outras criaturas mágicas que constituem o tema principal de sua arte representam posturas de respeito, integração e contemplação em relação à natureza, posturas essas que vêm se perdendo em sociedades radicadas em ambientes urbanos.

Palavras-chave: arte, representações da natureza, Antropoceno.

Resumen: El Antropoceno es una era de inestabilidad ambiental resultante de un pacto social establecido en la modernidad que excluye a la naturaleza como entidad dotada de derechos. Existen, no obstante, otras representaciones posibles de la naturaleza que constituyen líneas de fuga frente a este pacto social. Las instituciones que mantienen bosques experimentales crean condiciones privilegiadas para actividades de aprendizaje al aire libre y pueden contribuir a procesos de educación ambiental alineados con el establecimiento de estos contratos sociales alternativos. Este ensayo propone un proyecto de extensión titulado "La sala de clase es el bosque", que consiste básicamente en *workshops* artísticos realizados en un bosque experimental dentro de un campus universitario. Como material didáctico de apoyo para ser utilizado en este proyecto, el ensayo incluye también una entrevista con la ilustradora neerlandesa Iris Compiet, conocida por su arte inspirado en la naturaleza. En la entrevista, ella comenta su proceso creativo y defiende una forma de arte fundamentalmente autoral, que otorga mayor relevancia al proceso que al resultado final —sin recurrir a Inteligencias Artificiales generativas—, mediante el uso de materiales y técnicas tradicionales (especialmente la acuarela). Las hadas y otras criaturas mágicas que constituyen el tema principal de su obra representan actitudes de respeto, integración y contemplación hacia la naturaleza, actitudes que se han ido perdiendo progresivamente en sociedades arraigadas en entornos urbanos.

Palabras clave: arte, representaciones de la naturaleza, Antropoceno.
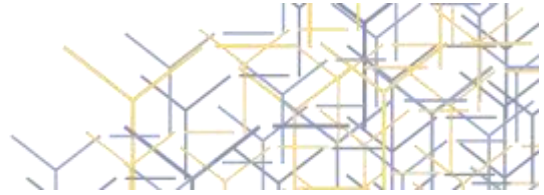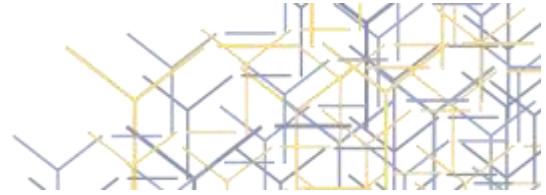
Illustration 1 - Driftwood dryad

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has been authorized by the author exclusively for the purposes of this paper.
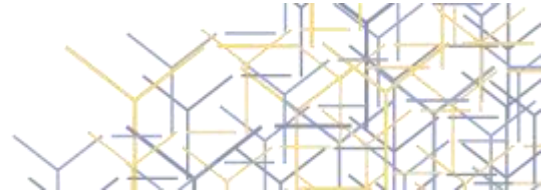
1 TOWARD A POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC SOCIAL PACT

Nature simply *exists*.

The term, however, is often used in an overly simplistic way, as if "nature" referred to everything that lies outside the urban realm (*us* on one side, and *them*, the non-human things, on the other). But which of the many possible framings are we actually referring to when we mention nature: biomes, habitats, biogeochemical cycles, biodiversity, the broad range of ecological relationships (which interlink and shape all these other dimensions)? And where, or how—or even *to what extent*—do human beings situate themselves among the parts that make up this whole thing that we conventionally call "nature", inevitably in a reductionist manner?

Answering this last question alone could lead to countless essays (as it has done, time and again): on the human exceptionalism within Judeo-Christian traditions; on the fundamental distinction drawn by Cartesian rationalism between nature and culture; on the hierarchization of life in the scientific cabinets that followed the Renaissance; on the introduction of Darwinism in the 19th century, which definitively inscribed the human species within an evolutionary continuum alongside other forms of life on Earth; on the understanding of the environment as an exploitable resource within industrial societies; and so on. One way or another, across winding lines of inquiry, all these discussions ultimately leads us to contemporary debates on the Anthropocene—this supposed geological era proposed by Crutzen (2002), in which anthropogenic activities (such as the emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, agriculture and livestock farming, large-scale deforestation, excessive consumption of freshwater, overproduction of waste, etc.) come to be understood as forces analogous to geological ones, capable of significantly altering landscapes, natural cycles, and the planet's ecological stability.

It should be noted that the word *supposed* was used because, although the term has been widely employed in debates on climate change since the beginning of the 21st century, there is still no consensus regarding its formalization within the scientific community. In 2024, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (the branch of Geology that studies the layers of rocks and sediments of the Earth) rejected the recognition of the Anthropocene as a formal geological epoch (Boivin; Braje; Rick, 2024). This does not mean, however, that the anthropogenic activities cited in order to theorize the Anthropocene do not constitute a problem.

It is argued that the industrial societies of the 20th century—born out of the scientific revolution (16th and 17th centuries) and the industrial revolutions (with the first wave between the 18th and 19th centuries), and therefore heirs to modernity—generally established a disharmonious relationship with nature, in all its meanings and framings. The Anthropocene, the age of humans, thus becomes an era of environmental instability, in which nature is bound to perish due to human fault and/or

responsibility. Serres (1994) argues that modern Western men excluded nature from their social contract[2], recognizing only what is human as a subject of rights and thereby reinforcing the understanding of nature as an external object, available for appropriation, use, and exploitation. What the author calls a new "natural contract" would therefore be a revisiting of the social pact that launched modernity, in order to include nature as a subject of rights as well. Many contemporary narratives and social movements have been moving in this direction.
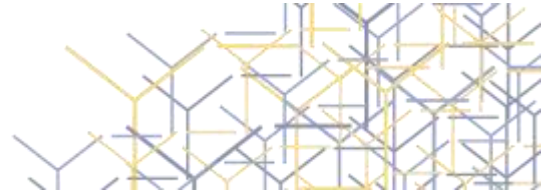
2 MULTIPLE REPRESENTATIONS OF ONE SINGLE NATURE

These Anthropocene-related issues are, of course, important, but for now let us return to the opening statement of this micro-essay: nature does exist independently of human beings—who are merely one among the many mammalian species still alive in the 21st century[3]. Yet, within the symbolic systems created by these culture-bearing mammals, different social collectives (and the individuals who comprise them) produce markedly distinct ways of inhabiting, sensing, interpreting, and representing nature. The ways in which human beings relate to the so-called natural world vary profoundly across societies, since the very notion of "nature" does not correspond to an objective and universal concept, but rather to symbolic elaborations situated in time and crystallized as part of different processes of culturation.

What is being referenced here is the "universal process through which a human child learns, from birth onward, to adjust their behavior to the culture of their society" (Titiev, 2002, p. 391, translated into English based on the Portuguese edition), a process known as *en*culturation. If the same human individual, once integrated into the culture of his or her society, is then exposed to another culture, they will undergo a process of *a*cculturation, which may range from conflict to mutual assimilation between different cultural systems. Processes of culturation—internal mechanisms of cultural reproduction—account for the continuity of the human condition. According to Gomes (2013): "The primary means of cultural reproduction is the transmission of cultural meanings not only from generation to generation, but also within the same generation, in everyday life. This occurs *through language and through behavior that is taught*, emulated, and learned [...]. By transmitting the *meanings that characterize it*, culture

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[2] The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted in 1789 in the context of the French Revolution, is considered one of the founding documents of modernity. According to the Declaration, human beings possess natural, universal, and inalienable rights that do not depend on the Church or on a given monarchy, but are guaranteed by the very condition of being human. In this way, the document breaks with the former social hierarchy based on hereditary privileges, establishing the common citizen, understood as a rational individual, as the central subject of law and politics.

[3] [...] and it should be clear to my readers that such a statement is far from naïve, as it articulates a position on where, how, and/or to what extent human beings should be placed within the natural order.

simultaneously sustains itself." (Gomes, 2013, p. 40, emphasis added, translated into English based on the Portuguese edition).
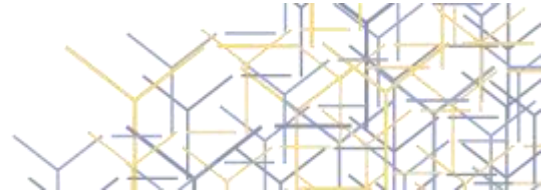
In some cultural contexts (such as the West, shaped by some of the traditions previously mentioned, including Judeo-Christian religions and Cartesian philosophy), the natural world is conceived and represented as an external domain, utterly distinct from culture; in others (such as various animist traditions found around the world—some of which, it should be noted, persist as lines of flight within the West itself), the natural world is understood, and also represented, as a continuation of the human condition, with ontological boundaries far more loosely defined than those to which we may be accustomed.

According to Hall (2016), representations involve the use of language "to intelligibly express something about the world, or to represent it to other people" (Hall, 2016, p. 31, translated into English based on the Portuguese edition). For the author, to represent is to place objects, subjects, and phenomena within shared systems of meaning through which meanings are constructed, stabilized, and eventually contested. Representations are not mere descriptions of the world, but systems, or conceptual maps, that organize the legitimate ways of thinking about the world.

We speak of nature in the singular, but if we are thinking specifically about its representations, we should speak of *natures*, plural, and these—contrary to the opening statement of this text—do not simply exist as entities independent of human will; rather, as *concepts*, they depend on processes of construction and appropriation through language. That is to say: biomes, habitats, natural cycles, different species, ecological relationships, and so on (that is, nature itself) may well exist in the materiality of the world, but for human cultures their representations are multiple, and depending on which conceptual map is being applied, the ways of existing *in* and *with* the natural world may differ drastically.

Let us take as an example a rather mundane form of representation: that produced by newspapers (which are themselves mechanisms of culturation) through their contemporary narratives about nature. For the purposes of this example, we take into account journalistic representations of a specific river, the Sorocaba River, which is the main river of the city that bears the same name. A study (Profeta; Ferranti, 2024)[4] conducted in this city analyzed all texts about this watercourse published in the newspaper *Cruzeiro do Sul* in the previous year, aiming at identifying and categorizing the main themes with which the river is associated within that coverage. It was found that 24.68% of the texts dealt specifically with floods caused by the river's overflow,

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[4] This publication is related to the project titled "Development of the Metropolitan Region of Sorocaba: Contributions to Social and Environmental Sustainability" (in Portuguese: "Desenvolvimento da Região Metropolitana de Sorocaba (RMS): Contribuições para a Sustentabilidade Social e Ambiental"), carried out by the graduate programs of the University of Sorocaba (Uniso), with the support of the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq, in the Portuguese acronym), grant no. 440869/2022-6.

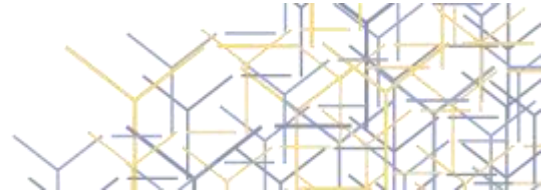while another 18.35% focused on dredging works aimed at preventing such floods. Overall, the results...

> [...] seem to indicate that texts about the river follow the seasonality of rainfall and, in doing so, associate the river with hindrances to urban life, either those that have already occurred (roughly, one quarter of the entire coverage in 2023) or those that are anticipated to take place in the future [...]. In other words, the river is being represented as a problem, a nuisance, an obstacle to human life in the city. [...]
> It is true that, at least in 2023, half of the coverage related to the Sorocaba River focused on reporting the disruptions associated with the watercourse when it does not "behave" in the way we would like (and in the way it has been modified or "domesticated" to behave over the decades). However, it is debatable whether such information fulfills any political role (in the sense of mobilizing people to change their attitudes, or to monitor public authorities, etc.), or any educational role (in the sense of understanding the processes associated with river overflow, rainfall formation, urbanization, and so on) (Profeta; Ferranti, 2024, p. 108, translated into English based on the Portuguese edition).

Rivers are unquestionably important water resources that perform multiple ecological functions; however, in this context, they cannot be reduced simply to their condition as watercourses; they are also socioecological systems, once they shape and are shaped by the human societies that inhabit their basins, and symbolic systems, because their existence as cultural constructs depends on representation efforts. In this sense, the form of representation identified by Profeta and Ferranti (2024) constitutes a practical example of the ramifications (media-related, in this case) of the exclusionary social pact mentioned by Serres (1994), which positions nature as a mere resource to be exploited by rights-bearing humans, and whose reformulation constitutes one of the most urgent conflicts of our times.

3 OUTDOOR LEARNING

In the context of the Anthropocene, which, as we have seen, compels us to rethink our modes of relating to nature—perhaps by looking at it more from the inside out than from the outside in—, it becomes important to reflect on how different practices, including communicational ones (such as journalism) as well as pedagogical practices, play their roles in the construction of imaginaries, identities, and senses of place related to nature (that is, its representations). Such practices mobilize diverse strategies to (re)construct lost or weakened bonds with the natural world, leading us to the need to redraw (or even blur) the boundaries between human and non-human and, ultimately, to conceive new and necessary propositions for the so-called natural contract.
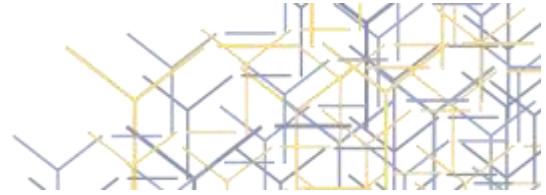
The writing of this essay follows directly from a journalistic interview titled "The classroom is the forest: a call for a school that (re)connects man and nature" (Profeta, 2025), published as part of a science journalism project led by the University of Sorocaba (Uniso) in December 2025. The interview, which featured two international researchers, discusses the role of outdoor learning—"in other words, that kind of learning that takes place in outdoor environments such as parks, forests, rivers, backyards, or community gardens, and that values direct experience with the natural world" (Profeta, 2025, p. 16)—in school-based environmental education processes. Essentially, the text examines how outdoor learning offers a range of academic and personal benefits, including the development of environmental responsibility. It argues for the need to incorporate cross-disciplinary experiences involving natural spaces into the curricula of a wide range of disciplines (even those not directly related to the Biological Sciences), as well as for the conditions required to make this integration effective, including alignment between school management and teaching staff, and appropriate technical training. The text also provides a list of external institutional resources and examples of citizen science programs based on outdoor activities, which may serve as starting points for emerging initiatives that have this goal in mind.

It is evident, however, that the implementation of outdoor learning activities depends, among other factors, on facilitated, safe, and minimally controlled access to natural spaces, both for students and for teachers themselves. Just as universities are considered "healthy environments" (Oliveira, 2024, p. 112) within the context of health promotion, for being perceived as strategic sites when it comes to actions aiming at this purpose, it is also argued here that they can assume strategic roles when it comes to establishing forms of physical and affective engagement between citizens and natural spaces, acting as institutional mediators between education (both within and beyond school settings), research, and territory—in this case, the territories where contemporary societies still make room for nature to exist—, something that is also related to the socioecological approach to health articulated in the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) [5].

Educational institutions that have experimental forests and/or preserved and protected natural reserves on their own campuses, in particular, create especially favorable conditions for enabling such pedagogical practices, by providing infrastructure, technical-scientific support, and safety conditions that can foster the integration of teaching, research, and outreach, as well as environmental education through outdoor experiences.

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[5] The Ottawa Charter is regarded as a foundational document in the field of public health. Drafted in 1986 during the First International Conference on Health Promotion, organized by the World Health Organization (WHO), the Charter advocates, among other principles, for a socioecological approach to health that takes into account the relationships between human populations and their environment.

4 ON THE EXPERIMENTAL FOREST OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOROCABA

Uniso is one of these institutions that maintain experimental forests on campus. Located in the city of Sorocaba, state of São Paulo, the university primarily serves the Metropolitan Region of Sorocaba (RMS, in the Portuguese acronym), a region that concentrates around 5% of the state's population and stands out among São Paulo's metropolitan regions as the one with the highest agricultural production, in addition to intense industrial activity (Emplasa, 2017). Moreover, in 2023 the region recorded a GDP exceeding R$150 billion, representing 1.38% of Brazil's GDP and placing it ahead of several Brazilian states (IBGE, 2026). The institution's main campus was inaugurated in 1999, in a highly anthropized area within the city, and its construction followed a planning strategy that restricted built occupation to only 5% of the land, while prioritizing permanent environmental recovery initiatives, such as the reforestation of permanent preservation areas.

In May 2002, more than 1,600 seedlings of 23 different species were planted at various points across the campus, selected from native tree species of the Brazilian savanna (*Cerrado*) and Atlantic Forest biomes. Later, in 2009, a new large-scale planting initiative was carried out through a partnership with the SOS Mata Atlântica Foundation, resulting in the planting of an additional 15,000 seedlings, representing 80 native species, across two areas totaling 7.8 hectares. Over the years, further measures to reinforce reforestation were implemented, thus consolidating an experimental forest that has been continuously and systematically monitored since 2014, following the creation of the Biological Sciences program at the institution. The environmental quality achieved through this process is now evidenced by the presence of rare animal species situated at the top of the food chain, such as the otter and the gray eagle, which inhabit or use these green areas as transit spaces.
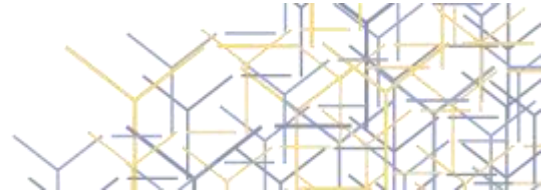
Illustration 2 - University faculty members walking through the experimental forest
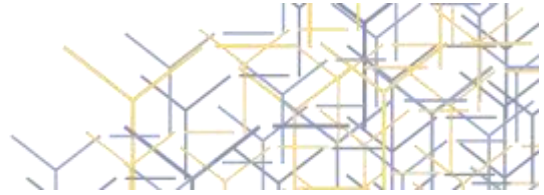

Source: Photograph by Paulo Ribeiro (archive of the Science @ Uniso project), included in the story by Profeta (2021)

Accordingly, the institution affirms that it understands the management and conservation of its forested areas as a moral commitment that goes beyond mere compliance with environmental legislation. Additional information about these initiatives and the history of Uniso's experimental forest can be found in the story "Sustainable development: How Uniso has turned an infertile pasture into a refuge for biodiversity" (Profeta, 2021).

5 CONTEXT: THE OUTREACH PROJECT "THE CLASSROOM IS THE FOREST"

In this context, an outreach project, which also serves as a research initiative, was envisioned, based on the use of Uniso's experimental forest as an outdoor learning space through artistic workshops. This project shares its title with one of the aforementioned journalistic texts: "The classroom is the forest."

Within this project, while access to the experimental forest is intended to provide experiential contact with the natural environment—the foundation of outdoor learning—the choice of artistic workshops aims at intentionally distancing the activity from purely technical exercises, which are typically developed within the Biological Sciences program or other programs directly related to nature management (and thus largely inaccessible to the broader community). The plan is to conduct illustration workshops based on on-site visits to the forest, in which participating students are

encouraged to creatively develop characters inspired by native plant species, drawing on mythical references and/or pop culture bestiaries. This approach rests on the understanding that such thematic connections make the overall learning process more meaningful by referring to a cultural repertoire with which students already have established emotional ties:

> We understand that offering the possibility of moving through the cosmos of pop culture narratives, disseminated through products of the culture industry, is to provide access to other dimensions, external to the harshness of reality, allowing one to momentarily withdraw from that reality and enter into the enjoyment of what is beautiful and pleasurable—ergo, the realm of the aesthetic—and, precisely within this (other) dimension, to construct forms of learning oriented back toward the self who inhabits real, concrete, everyday life. For this reason, we argue that whatever is set out by the curriculum (which guides knowledge-making within the classroom) may be offered to students as an imitation of the fantastic, which, in turn, is an imitation of reality, but a reality cloaked in poetry, which is therefore more accessible to be truly felt in comparison to the raw and cold reality. (Santos; Profeta, 2025, p. 9, translated into English based on the Portuguese edition)

The proposal is that selected students, from various educational levels, participate in lectures on the main species of interest[6] among the trees that occur within Uniso's experimental forest, thus addressing the process of developing and maintaining it, as well as the morphological aspects to be observed in each species. This lecture would then be followed by a preparatory stage for the illustration process (defining the materials to be used; researching references; discussing intentions, techniques, and personal styles; etc.). After these two stages, students would be guided to the forest for an observation session, followed by a designated period for sharing the resulting artistic works.

The interview presented in the following section of this essay, with Dutch illustrator Iris Compiet, was originally conceived to serve as support material for the aforementioned outreach and research project, and may as well be consulted both by its direct participants/volunteers and by anyone who is interested in the topic of representations of nature.

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[6] Initially: *Erythrina speciosa* (Portuguese common name: *suinã*), *Anadenanthera colubrina* (*angico*), *Calophyllum brasiliensis* (*guanandi*), *Peltophorum dubium* (*canafístula*), *Coutarea hexandra* (*quineira*), *Joannesia princeps* (*boleira*), and *Ceiba speciosa* (*paineira*), according to a consultation with professor Nobel Penteado de Freitas, PhD, coordinator of Uniso's Center for Environmental Studies.
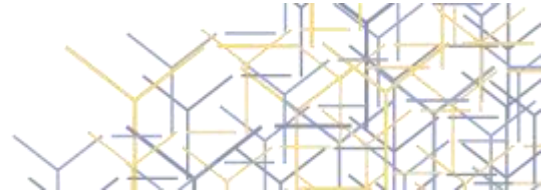
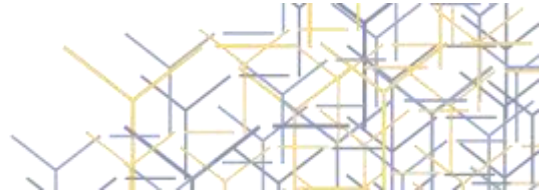Illustration 3 - *La fée verte*, the green fairy

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has been authorized by the author exclusively for the purposes of this paper

6 INTERVIEW WITH ILLUSTRATOR IRIS COMPIET

Iris Compiet has been building a career for over fifteen years, marked by fantasy illustration and a constant exchange with mythical universes. In 2016, she found her creative path again toward the realm of faeries (with which she has maintained an affective connection since childhood), thus initiating an independent project titled *Faeries of the Faultlines* (Compiet, 2021), published as a book in English, German, Italian, and Spanish.

The work is a collection of watercolor illustrations, sketches, and short tales, presented as if they were field notes resulting from the author's incursions into what she calls the Faultlines—which can be interpreted as some sort of "fissures between worlds."

> The Faultlines isn't a place in the traditional sense of the word; at least, it's not just one place, but many. It's perhaps best described as areas where the veil between our human world and the world of the faeries is thinnest and we can enter a world that is still ours but slightly different [...].

> You may have glimpsed the veil before in a single dewdrop, in a rainbow, or even in the corner of your eye when you had the distinct feeling someone—or something—was watching you. The veil is here, always and everywhere: it is around you, beneath you, above you, behind you, and even inside you. Faeries are everywhere if you just know how to look for them (Compiet, 2021, p. 9).

In her book, the author catalogues a wide range of "species" of faeries: greenmen (humanoid entities that protect forests), faery chrysalis, fauns, mandrake, witches, trolls, different variations of gnomes, pixies (small mischievous faeries known for playing tricks on humans, spelled in the book in an authorial way as *pizkie*), dragons, and mermaids. To varying degrees, these creatures are inspired by different European folkloric traditions—sometimes adhering closely to their original mythology, sometimes allowing creative liberties—and, in general, they are presented in a style that simulates the field journals of a naturalist: systematic and attentive records of direct observation of nature, combining science-like descriptions, personal experiences, and a refined aesthetic awareness, integrating verbal text and image. To a large extent, the creatures depicted are inspired by and designed through reworked elements of the natural world: parts of plant species, especially trees (leaves, flowers, branches, roots, etc.); parts of various animals; fungi; and so on. This is a recurring characteristic of Compiet's work and is very likely what most strongly defines her personal style.

Faeries of the Faultlines kicked off a series of significant developments in Compiet's career, opening the door to collaborations as an illustrator on works such as *The Dark Crystal Bestiary* (Cesare; Compiet, 2020), *Jim Henson's Labyrinth Bestiary* (Bende; Compiet, 2022), and *Star Wars Bestiary* (Bende; Compiet, 2024), as well as to projects with internationally recognized companies and studios such as Netflix, Disney, and Wizards of the Coast (including artwork for the renowned card game *Magic: The Gathering*).

At its core, this interview is driven by a deep interest in understanding the behind-the-scenes of the illustrator's creative process, exploring how attentive observation of the natural world fuels the creation of images, characters, and imagined worlds. By examining the differences between creating from direct experience and from mediated references, while engaging in dialogue with mythologies and contemporary pop culture, the interview seeks to understand what motivates, guides, and directs her gaze when nature is transformed into illustration: whether morphological, symbolic, emotional, or narrative aspects, or an intersection of all these dimensions, and how her artistic practices entail a stance of care and respect toward natural contexts and the non-human species that often inspire her work.
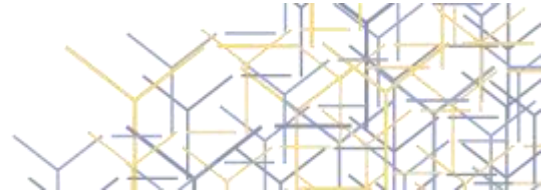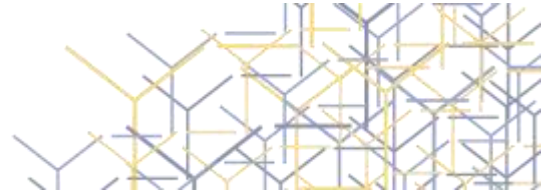
Illustration 4 - Fallen leaves

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has
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Guilherme Profeta: May I ask you to briefly introduce yourself? You have collaborated with Disney, Netflix, Wizards of the Coast etc., and, of course, there is your phenomenal book, *Faeries of the Faultlines*. Could you tell us about how you got into making art, and about some of your main projects?

Iris Compiet: I'm Iris, and I'm a traditional artist from the Netherlands. By "traditional," I mean that I work with traditional media such as watercolors, acrylics, and oil paints. I also sculpt and generally do anything that gets my hands dirty. I really enjoy the feel of materials. I've wanted to be an artist since I was about seven years old, and the reason I became so enamored with art was a book called *Fairies*, by Brian Froud and Alan Lee, which I found in my local library when I was a child. When I opened that book, it was exactly everything I had hoped it would be and everything I wanted to do myself. I grew up in the early 1980s, watching films like *Labyrinth*, *The Dark Crystal*, and *The Princess Bride*—all those amazing fantasy stories. I was very much a child who loved storytelling and fairy tales. Growing up in Europe, we were surrounded by darker stories
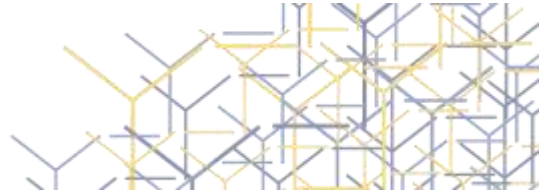
from the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. So I've always felt a strong pull toward folklore and mythology—anything that wasn't quite reality. When I discovered *Fairies*, that was the moment I realized: "OK, this is something you can actually do as a job; people really do this for a living." That's when I decided I wanted to become an artist.

My career path was quite weird, in the sense that I had tried a lot of things. I didn't study illustration or fine art; I studied graphic design instead, and I had been working as a graphic designer for 16 years, while, on the side, during evenings and weekends, I tried to build a career as an illustrator. I did a lot of different things, but nothing ever really worked out. In 2016, I reached a point where I felt I was done trying to make it professionally, so I decided I would just make art for myself. That was when I started sketching fairies again and returned to what I loved about art and storytelling, without being bothered by what was considered trendy on social media. That was the moment something clicked. Suddenly, people became interested in what I was doing. In a nutshell, that eventually led me to launch a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter for the first edition of *Faeries of the Faultlines*. And it was a huge success: the project was fully funded within the first 48 minutes, and suddenly I was chatting with director Guillermo del Toro, who backed the campaign and bought an original artwork. That was really where my life and career began to change.

All of a sudden, I was doing what I loved—painting fairies and creating the kind of art I loved to see in the world. I started getting questions like "Do you want to work for *Magic*?" and "Do you want to work on *The Dark Crystal Bestiary*?" Then came *Labyrinth*, *Star Wars*, and eventually Guillermo del Toro asked me to join his team for a Netflix project. All of these things happened because of that one book, *Faeries of the Faultlines*. That is, in a nutshell, how my career truly began—after many ups and downs, and wrong turns, and hitting my head on brick walls, and getting a lot of denials. Now I travel the world and speak on stages in places like South Africa and the United States about being authentically yourself in art. For me, everything I do has to be something I genuinely want to work on. I often ask myself "If I weren't being paid for this, would I still do it?"—and please don't tell my clients that—; if the answer is yes, then it's a good job for me. I truly believe that your best work is the work you do with passion, and that's the most important thing for me.

Guilherme Profeta: It's amazing that you mentioned being ready to give up and then going back to your roots, to what you truly believe in and enjoy, and from there seeing things working out organically...

Iris Compiet: Yes, I think that's very important. It's so easy for us, as human beings—and especially as artists—to forget why we make art in the first place. I certainly forgot. I forgot that little seven-year-old kid who loved to draw and wasn't really bothered by what other people thought. Instead, I was trying to please others. I

was trying to please potential clients or nameless followers on social media. You want to get likes, and that becomes the goal. You feel like you have to get likes, have a certain number of followers, and do this or that. By pursuing that external validation, you forget why you're doing it. And I completely forgot. I was making art for the wrong reasons, and the work just didn't feel right. It didn't feel like my art. I'm still proud of it, it's still something I made, but it wasn't really me. At the same time, I think I had to go through all of that to feel more comfortable and confident in what I'm doing now. None of it was a failure. It was necessary. I had to get it out of the way so I could understand what I actually wanted to do.

At that point, I had a good-paying day job as a graphic designer. I enjoyed my work, was involved in fun projects, and was still being creative. And I thought "You know, it's fine. I tried." Even if that was it, I was still an artist, even if I wasn't working as a professional artist. That's something I tell people all the time: it doesn't matter whether you're a professional artist who gets paid by clients; if you create, you're an artist. And I mean creating in the broadest sense. Someone who knits a sweater is an artist to me because that's a skill they had to learn and perfect, and they create something out of nothing. The same goes for musicians, dancers—anyone who creates in any form.

So for me, it became about creating art for myself, for that seven-year-old kid who's still inside me. I wanted to create mermaids. That's where it began. There was a hashtag on Instagram called MerMay back in May 2016—it's still running in May every year, I think—, and I decided I would do one sketch a day. It didn't have to be fancy or elaborate, just a few lines on paper depicting a mermaid the way I saw them. That was my only goal: draw the sketch, post it online, write a little story, and that was it. And I had so much fun doing it every single day that, by the end of May, I thought "OK, now it's June, what do I do next?" Then June came and the theme was fairies. I decided I'd do fairies then, and it just kept going. I didn't stop. Within two or three months, maybe four, I had filled 25 sketchbooks with fairies, mermaids, and all these creatures that were just pouring out of me. It became easier to pick up my pencils and sketch.

I was having so much fun because I was creating the things I wanted to create and telling the stories I wanted to tell, all connected to my first love: folklore and fairy tales. Seeing how people reacted to it was wonderful. When people asked me "You have so much material now, what are you going to do with it?", I thought "I'm a graphic designer. I'll just make a book." And I decided to design a book and put it on Kickstarter to see how it would go. I thought maybe I'd sell 300 copies, print 500, and keep the remaining 200 to sell over the years until I die. Instead, the first edition ended up being 2,500 copies, and I shipped them all within two or three months. It was a lot of work, but honestly, it was the best thing that could ever have happened to me.
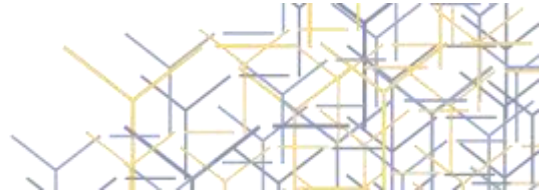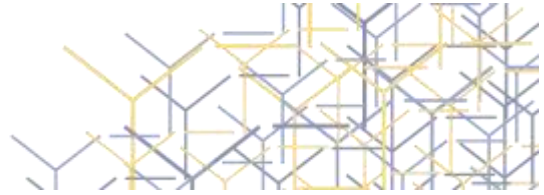
Illustration 5 - Greenman

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has been authorized by the author exclusively for the purposes of this paper.
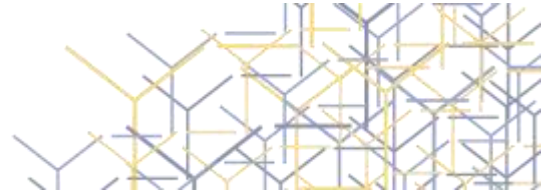
Guilherme Profeta: Especially after *Faeries of the Faultlines*, much of your work seems to engage directly with nature. You also mentioned that you prefer to work with traditional techniques, so I assume there are minimal retouches and that everything we see in the book does exist in physical form somewhere. I'm also assuming that you spend a lot of time observing nature. To what extent does this direct contact with nature—observing plants, textures, cycles, and landscapes—influence your creative process? Do you notice a difference between creating from direct experience and creating solely from other references, such as books, digital images, or videos, for example?

Iris Compiet: People often ask me about my inspiration, and my biggest source of inspiration is, quite obviously, nature. If you look around, there is no creature designer as amazing as nature itself. There are creatures and plants in the world that we are still discovering, and they are so beautiful, so interesting, and so perfectly designed that you can't help but wonder: how did this evolve like this? So nature is the biggest influence for me as far as inspiration goes.

I can't always go outside as much as I'd like to. I live in an area where there isn't a lot of nature that really appeals to me. But when I do get the chance, I feel like a sponge, just soaking everything up and then squeezing it out again. There is definitely something to be said about experiencing nature directly, and whenever I can, I try to spend as much time outside as possible. Two weeks ago, for example, I was in South Africa, and that kind of nature was completely new to me and very different from what I experience in the Netherlands. I took every opportunity to simply observe: watching the birds, looking at the plants, seeing how different they are. Even when we recognize certain plants from places back home, they grow differently there—how they flourish, how they look.

I like going to botanical gardens, taking reference photos, but also just being fully present. Taking in the smells, touching everything I safely can, going snorkeling and seeing what exists beneath the surface of the water. I try to gather as many experiences in nature as possible to really get a feel for things, and then let the land overwhelm me. I let it wash over me and just allow it all in. I never really know how these experiences will show up in my work; I just let things happen.

You also asked about my materials and my choice of techniques. I prefer watercolors because they are as close to working with nature as I can possibly get. You can actually make watercolors from natural materials. You can take a rock, grind it into fine dust to use as pigment, combine it with honey, gum arabic, and water, and create paint. You can even paint with water taken directly from a waterfall. I've done that in Iceland, for example. There's a piece in the book about an Icelandic giant that I painted using a rock in the landscape as inspiration and water from a waterfall. It's a sleeping giant. For me, watercolors are the closest I can come to working directly with nature itself. They don't require much cleaning, and you can use them anywhere. All I really

need is a pencil and a small box of paints. I have many more paints, but that's enough for me to create a piece.

This allows me to simply observe and let the inspiration flow, letting nature do the talking. That's also why I'm so interested in this kind of work. I want to use my art to help people become more respectful toward nature. Historically, fairies were beings you had to respect. They were nature spirits, and respect for them meant respect for nature itself. And I think that in modern times we've lost that respect. We believe we can control everything, but we can't. There is only so much we can control before nature says it's enough. Nature will always win. We cannot stop that. I think we've lost respect by believing we can mold nature entirely to our wishes.
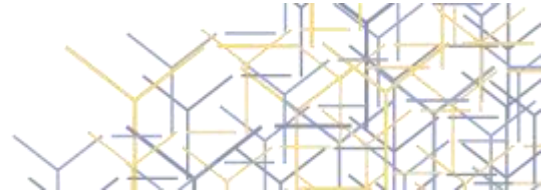
Through my art, I try to make people aware that even the smallest things have beauty and are worthy of respect. That's why I like creating these pieces. I want people to look differently at things they see every day, even a clump of grass growing between paving stones, and wonder: could that be a fairy? I believe that kind of thinking is important.

Guilherme Profeta: So could we say that, when you mention being in places like Iceland and observing the landscape and nature, there are elements involved that go beyond morphology, color, or texture? I mean symbolic, narrative, emotional, or psychological elements. For example, you mentioned folklore. There seems to be a moment when a specific place, light, and atmosphere trigger a story or an idea, rather than you setting out to create that story beforehand. At other times, it might come from something you've read. How do these layers of observation intertwine in your work, especially considering the worldbuilding[7] and lore[8] that accompany your images?

Iris Compiet: There isn't one single answer to that, because often it starts with something I see that sparks my imagination and sets an idea in motion. For example, I was in Iceland at the Goðafoss waterfalls. As the sun was going down, I was sitting on a rock very close to the water. The waterfalls were overwhelming, and there was mist and spray rising up, constantly moving. The golden light from the sun reflected in it, and it looked like fairies dancing. That moment sparked the idea of sylphs, which are also in the book. I wrote a story about them, about how they dance in the midst of the waterfalls and how life is very fleeting. I never set out to create that story beforehand. It only emerged because I was sitting there, in that exact moment, with that specific

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[7] Worldbuilding is the process of building a world that does not exist, namely creating a coherent fictional world (including its own geography, history, cultures, rules, and systems), usually for the purpose of providing context and depth to a narrative or visual universe.

[8] In this context, the word lore refers to the accumulated knowledge about a fictional setting or narrative. Lore can be understood as the set of pieces of knowledge that spectators or readers must gradually gather in order to make sense of a fictional narrative, a process that closely intertwines with worldbuilding.

light, in that specific place. That experience triggered the idea. Sometimes, though, inspiration comes from reading something […].
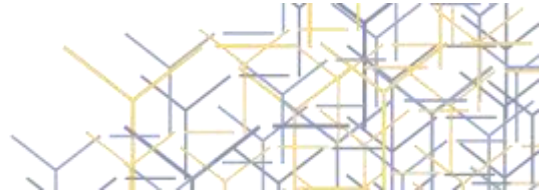
Guilherme Profeta: So it's almost like nature is out there co-creating with you, right?

Iris Compiet: Yes, definitely. Nature gives me inspiration, ideas, and stories. The only thing I do is take note of them. In the same way a writer writes things down, I paint. At other times, inspiration comes from books. I have many books on folklore, mostly focused on European traditions. I'm also very interested in other cultures, but I'm very aware that they are not my own. For example, I have books about South African folklore and legends, but I'm conscious that this is not my culture, and it's not always my place to tell those stories. I always encourage local people to do that: this is your culture, please tell these stories. I'm a white woman from Europe, and I don't think I should take stories that aren't mine and make them my own. So, even though I would love to dive into folklore from places like Brazil, for example, which has amazing folkloric legends, I'm aware that it's not my place to do so without due diligence, research, and respect.

But sometimes I'll read something and it will stay in the back of my mind. Then, months later, I'll see something in nature and that story will resurface. In a way, the two find each other. The inspiration from nature connects with something I've read before. So it really depends on how I'm feeling, on what I bring to the table, and on what nature gives me. When I'm not able to go out into nature—something you asked about earlier—and I work from references, that process is different. Even then, the references I usually use are things I've seen myself before. I use them to trigger my own memories.

Guilherme Profeta: So how do you document it? Do you have a sketchbook? Do you take pictures, or record short videos […]?

Iris Compiet: I take pictures, but mostly I take mental pictures. I do take a lot of photos, mostly with my phone (to be honest, I'm not really bothered with having a big camera with me, because it's annoying). I'm not a photographer. I'm not very good at it. I just need to document things. I've also noticed that the things I see, the things I witness with my own eyes, never translate to camera. Ever. So I've realized that I just need to be very present, looking at everything, being still, and memorizing it. What works best for me is simply sitting there, observing, and soaking it all up. Then I'll go home, and a month later, or even ten years later, something might find its way onto the page, based on that memory.

Guilherme Profeta: That's great. Thinking about our project, when we wander into the forest,it seems important to create enough time to do nothing, so to speak—to stay there, to truly be in the moment, without a schedule and without the pressure of time.
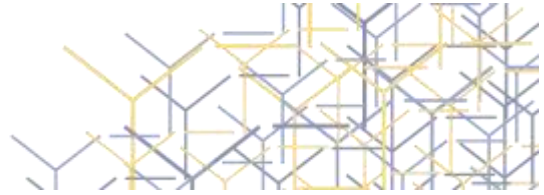
Iris Compiet: Yes, to be still. People aren't used to paying attention, especially when they're on a campus or in a place where they don't expect nature to be. Usually, they're just moving from point A to point B. Even in cities, if you look at urban parks, people are often just passing through, rushing around, getting on with life and doing their thing. I think that's what people mostly forget, because we carry the whole world in our pockets now, with smartphones. We get so distracted by these devices that connect us to everything, yet disconnect us from nature, from ourselves, and from the world immediately around us. Many people are almost incapable of sitting on a bench and simply watching how the wind moves through the trees, or lying on the grass and looking at the clouds passing by.

For me, it's very important to simply be still. I rarely sketch when I'm out in nature. Instead, I really try to soak everything up. I sit, I watch, I listen, I smell. Every sense is used. It's about taking in all the images, sounds, smells, and textures. Touch is very important too: how does a leaf feel? How does this leaf feel compared to another? It's about memorizing all that. I think this is crucial because it's the closest I can get to nature. When I take photographs, there's still a screen between me and the plant or subject. But when I'm just there, looking, there's nothing in between. It's raw. It's a direct, one-on-one experience.

I always suggest that people try this themselves: take half an hour or an hour each day, sit somewhere, do absolutely nothing, and focus on something that is not human. In a city, there are obviously many human-made sounds, but try to block those out and focus only on that piece of nature that is closest to you. Try to identify it. Try to memorize it. Focus on its color, its shape, and what you imagine it feels like.

Guilherme Profeta: At what point do the stories emerge in this process? For example, when you created *Faeries of the Faultlines*, after making the sketches and watercolors, you also sat down to write the stories. How did that process work? When do the stories come to you—before you start working, while you're out there observing, or afterward?

Iris Compiet: At the same moment I put my pencil on paper. As I start drawing, something happens. The way I draw is often very intuitive: I put the pencil on the paper sheet, start moving it, and then I look at what's emerging and think, "Oh, I guess you want to be that." Sometimes I have sketches I made ten years ago with no idea what the story was at the time. I'll have the piece—either scanned or still in my sketchbook—with no sense of what it meant. Then, five or ten years later, I'll flip through my sketchbooks and suddenly that sketch stands out to me, and I know the story. So it's
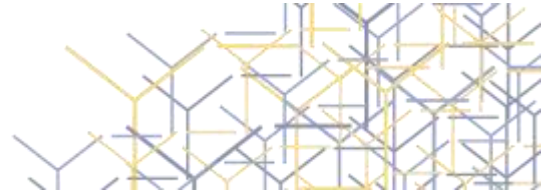
very difficult for me to explain when exactly the story happens, because it's all very intuitive. It's about being ready to hear the story and ready to tell it. I can't really identify what triggers that moment, it just happens. I know that might sound a bit weird, but I've come to accept that this is how I work. Things flow when they're ready. If they don't flow, it doesn't mean the art is bad; it means I'm not ready for that piece yet.

Illustration 6 - Fungi

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has been authorized by the author exclusively for the purposes of this paper.

Guilherme Profeta: As you were speaking, I was reminded of a well-known quote by George R. R. Martin, the author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the book series that inspired the TV show *Game of Thrones*. He describes two different approaches to writing: one based on careful planning, in which everything is mapped out in advance, just as an architect plans a house before it's built, and another that is more organic, where the author starts with a basic idea and allows the work to grow and take shape over time, discovering its form along the way, just as a gardener plants a seed and waits for it to grow. He has said that he identifies much more with this second approach. Listening to you, it seems that your process is also closer to this more organic, intuitive way of creating. You're a gardener, instead of an architect. At the same time, you've worked on large-scale projects and established fictional universes, collaborating with companies like Netflix and Disney. In those contexts, does your creative process change? How much freedom do you have to express yourself when you're working within worlds that were created and developed by many others before you?
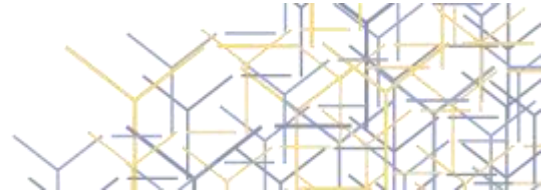
Iris Compiet: Yes, obviously there are restrictions. In universes like *Star Wars*, for instance, we all know what certain creatures look like, and I can't deviate from that. Those parameters are set, but within those boundaries, I always try to find my freedom as an artist in the way I portray things, through my own style. That is what I am asked to bring to these projects: my visual language. So I expect to be given the freedom to apply my style, and that is what I do.

I love working on these kinds of projects. I grew up with these worlds, so it is an honor to be part of them now. At the same time, there is obviously less freedom than in my own work, where I am the master over everything. In large projects like these, boundaries are clearly set, but there's also freedom and you can see how far you can go. So that's what I do. I try to find where the line is between my client and me, to understand what kind of tightrope I need to walk.

Some clients are very open and give me a lot of freedom. The Henson Company gave me a lot of freedom; they were amazing to work with and very enthusiastic about what I was doing. With *Labyrinth*, for example, when you have characters like Jareth and Sarah, they obviously have to look like Jareth and Sarah. They need to be accurate to the characters and to the actors, so likeness was important. Other than that, I could do my own thing. It didn't have to be photorealistic or anything. The brief was essentially: give your voice to these worlds.

The Dark Crystal was the project with the most freedom. There were many creatures from novels that had never been seen before. I was asked to create a few creatures for the world of Thra, and I was able to design creatures that nobody had ever seen. So there was a great deal of creative freedom there.

Guilherme Profeta: To conclude our conversation, I would like to return to the broader context of the environmental crisis—which also involves the phenomenon of eco-anxiety, which we have been researching at our university as well. Often, the role

of art, illustration in particular, is overlooked when it comes to fostering a more sensitive, critical, and possibly proactive relationship with nature. In this sense, how do you believe that the act of creating can help transform concern, or even anxiety, into engagement and truly meaningful action? And I would like to add another layer to this question, about something that you are very vocal about: we are living in an era of emerging AI-generated images, which are often framed as a form of "creation" (with many quotation marks), even though the creative process involved is fundamentally different from what you and other artists do. Where do you stand on that matter?
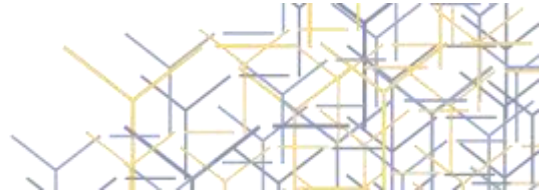
Iris Compiet: For me, first of all, generative AI is not creating. There is no creative process when it comes to AI. It is basically plagiarism. It is a tool that has been created and can only exist because it has scraped everybody's data and everybody's art. My work is in these databases against my will, and I did not consent to this.

I also think the biggest problem with generative AI at this moment is the impact it has on our planet, on nature, and on people as a whole. It pollutes our water. It takes so much energy to run. We really should not be doing this. And I think creating art is not about the end result. It's not about the picture itself, it's about the process of creating: having an idea, or having a "seed," planting it, and then letting it grow to become a final thing. If you ask a gardener what is the fun part in this process, it's actually that nurturing, when you take care of something and all of a sudden it's this beautiful thing. That process of creation is what AI generators and prompters do not understand. That is what makes you an artist.

And I think it's innately human, because for as long as humans have been around, we have told stories, either through music, cave paintings, anything. We've told our stories, our folklore, our cultures. We've shared our thoughts, our dreams, our hopes, our fears, everything, through storytelling in form of words, dance, music, paintings, and so on. So, to give that up to a machine that is destroying our environment and destroying our humanity at the same time is just the worst thing you can imagine. We're eradicating nature by generating these pretty pictures. It's unimaginable, even idiotic, if you think about it.

But I am still very hopeful that people will start to see this. There's always going to be people who are OK with this, who do not see the problem. But I do think people will find out it's uncanny, after all. I already see it and I already hear it: "Oh, it's another AI thing. I'm so tired of AI." People want that human connection. People want to see something real. So I'm hopeful that people will realize this before it's too late, before our lands are full of datacenters, before we have no more water to irrigate our crops or to drink.

I am also worried about the ecological disaster that's coming. That is the thing: I want my nieces, and everybody that will come after me, to be safe and able to go into nature and enjoy it, to see how diverse things are, without everything dying off. I dread the ecological disaster that's coming. But I refuse to believe that this can't be stopped.
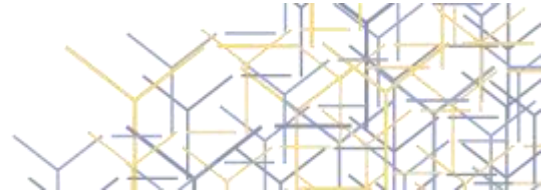
And it's by projects such as yours that people will understand how wonderful it is to be in nature, to just sit there for half an hour, or an hour a day, to listen and hear the birds sing, and to look at a plant and know that that plant, which seems very simple and not really interesting at first, could potentially cure your headache, for example. That information is so important. And I think art, through whatever medium, is all about the emotions it can evoke.

Illustration 7 - Baby mandrake

Source: Compiet (2021)©; the illustration is part of the book *Faeries of the Faultlines*, and its publication has been authorized by the author exclusively for the purposes of this paper.

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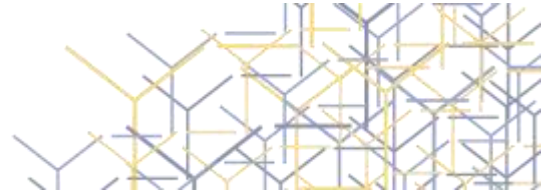
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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the interview "Human versus non-human in representations of nature in the Anthropocene: Micro-essay and interview with Dutch illustrator Iris Compiet".

DATA AVAILABILITY

The datasets on which this study is based are available within the article itself.

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