Narrating With Nature
Adorno, Benjamin and Shanshui Imaging Techniques

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Narrating is a specific way of making sense out of the disjunctive manifoldness of events and our experiences of the world. Giving something a narrative is to furnish it with a structure and order that leads to a progression and a sense of orientation and direction of where things come from and where they (might) head towards. Narration, thus, is a powerful cultural technique for humans to provide them with a hold and orientation in reality and history that constantly passes us by (Meretoja 2014). It weaves a thread into the manifoldness of the world that serves as an orientation for how things and the world (should) become and pass through time and history. Narration then turns into world-making.

Against the background of evermore aggravating ecological challenges, the functionalistic, instrumental, quantitative stories of nature told, often couched in the tradition and epistemic ideals of the Enlightenment, no longer seem adequate for reflecting our reality (James and Morel 2020; Plumwood 2002: 5–6). They neither match nor live up to our situation, or even seem to contradict it, while we appear to struggle both to materially come to terms with our environmental situation and establish new narratives to capture our situation. In light of this challenge, existing, rehearsed and familiar narratives about nature, such as the one of a passive nature and a solely active human culture, or that of humans as nature's rulers, have been questioned and found failing. Although such fractures in our narratives have probably always existed, over the past few decades it appears to have become ever more difficult to maintain instrumental narratives against our experience of and with nature. Instead, it has been increasingly recognized that we are not the only ones shaping the world, even if we now have to answer for a disastrously outsized harmful effect on it. It is acknowledged that other species and creatures, as well as objects, particles and matter, are crossing and intersecting with the human production of the world, co-creating the world with us; the enormous interest in and amount of scholarship on non-human agencies that tries to account for this recognition are a poignant example of this very realization (e.g. Herman 2014; Knickerbocker 2012). But the failing of narratives and the struggles to (re)narrate our current situation are also owed to the fact that the world is actually changing, with climate change and the sixth mass extinc-

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tion and their effects providing pertinent examples, while many of these processes are difficult to determine with precision or certainty, and the future generally appears uncertain, not just because of this.

Moreover, it is narration as a phenomenon and practice that manifests as a problem. The failing narratives have been well-rehearsed, handed-down and, thereby, etched into culture. Thus, they provide guidance, hold and orientation for making sense out of our situation. As a consequence, the very narratives and approaches to narration that are currently failing to capture the circumstances in which we find ourselves, are being reproduced and, thereby, extended into the future in a vicious cycle, whether by their own accord or to bolster up a claim for mastery in times where such mastery is challenged, or even obviously failing. The summer of 2023 with its boiling devastation across the globe exemplifies this: While the house was literally on fire, narration was peddled to tell us that we would still have time until the year of reckoning and, therefore, still be in control. Yet, precisely this idea of 'still having time until x', reproduces an almost mechanistic image of nature, with exactly measurable processes and points of no return, rather than that processes have been set in motion decades, maybe centuries ago that will continue long into the future, aggravating with every day that we continue our exploitative activities, and that tipping points are flexible; the very claim of 'still having time until' becomes nonsensical otherwise. The existing approaches to narration, thus, get in the way of responding to our situation, even if it requires ever more energy, caprioles, artifices and ignorance to maintain an image of nature as a resource that could be governed through management and engineering.

We turn to cultural critique Theodor W. Adorno to open up a path into addressing these narrative challenges in coming to terms with our current environmental situation. He muses in his *Aesthetic Theory* in diametrical contrast to the image of an instrumental, functional, managerial human relationship to nature:

> Technique, which is said to have ravished nature, according to a schema borrowed ultimately from bourgeois sexual morality, under transformed relations of production would just as easily be able to assist nature and on this sad earth help it attain whereto perhaps it wants [ihr zu dem zu helfen, wohin sie vielleicht möchte].[1] (Adorno 2002: 68)

In this quote, Adorno not only already brings the weight of nature as an independent agent to bear on the challenge of its exploitation and destruction, thus, reflecting today's condition, but goes even further by presenting nature as striving towards something itself and culture as a potential help in nature's quest, turning modern relations between humans and nature on their head (Krebber 2020). Nature serves and appears here, in the vein of Gunzelin Schmid Noerr's analysis of the concepts of remembrance of nature and mimesis in critical theory, as a *Grenzbegriff*, a border-concept (cf. 1990: 147). Rather than a clearly defined or determinable something, the term represents a refuge against appropriation and determination, both conceptually and materially, of that which exists

1 To recuperate specific meanings from the original, we quietly throughout adjust the existing translations of Benjamin's and Adorno's work that we reference.

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beyond human culture, and, as such, defies and indeed forbids definition. Nature necessarily and crucially remains historically fuzzy then, oscillating between a (non-human) constructive principle in the world, the world beyond human definition, and a collective term for things as they appear for themselves rather than for humans. On a phenomenological level, these dimensions are all mediated through each other, while also being always mediated by human culture (Cook 2011; Krebber 2017). In the following, we take recourse to and understand nature throughout the sources we engage in this very sense, while our approach is precisely an attempt to further narrow-in, make visible and concretize slowly what nature might be on its own accord – although we far from claim to provide a definitive answer to this. Following Adorno, we want to suggest that considering nature as striving towards something indeed helps to make sense out of our narrative challenges and current situation, while narration foreshadows as a potential technique for nature's assistance. We propose a narration *with* nature as a way of challenging relations of production, by countering established narrations *about* nature that uphold and continue existing (capitalistic, nature-dominating and -appropriating) relations of production, to open up the possibility for assisting nature to attain where it might want to head.

A lead for such narration came from a European artist friend of Zhonghao's a few years ago. Traversing the Li River in the city of Guilin together on a bamboo raft, his friend remarked that the landscape would exactly resemble an ink Shanshui painting. Shanshui – 山水畫, meaning 'mountain and water' – is one of the major image-making genres in traditional Chinese art (Clunas 2004; Sullivan 1984). His friend's remark led Zhonghao to ponder how an image consisting of mere ink on paper, devoid of vibrant colours and optical tonality, could capture the essence of nature and evoke a sense of likeness? It is from this question that our conversation ensues. Building on our reading of literati aesthetics, on the one hand, and Adorno's critical theory, complemented by the writings of Walter Benjamin, on the other, we found common ground in the idea of a (self-)expressivity of nature. In response, we set out blending Adorno and Benjamin's theoretical considerations on language, nature and (visual) art with Shanshui painting traditions and co-conceiving a theory-driven research process to empirically explore such expression in or of nature; Benjamin's review of an exhibition of Chinese paintings at the Bibliotèque nationale in Paris in 1937 provides an important link between the two (2008). We argue that, via the link of Benjamin's philosophy of language, the likeness of Shanshui paintings relates to Adorno's promise of assisting nature by way of nature's expression and eloquence (Gilloch and Kang 2016; Pinotti 2014). Interrelating Adorno with Benjamin, we, thus, explore Shanshui in the following as a technique to recognize and make visible that voice.

Adorno and Benjamin's Eloquent Nature

Adorno makes his observation on nature's striving as part of a reappreciation of natural beauty in and for aesthetic theory. Whereas in the passage quoted above he proposes that nature itself wants to head somewhere, and, thus, strives for something, natural beauty

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complements this recognition as a recognizable expression or forceful impartation of this tendency upon the human subject:

> A qualitative distinction in natural beauty can be sought, if anywhere, in the degree to which something not made by human beings speaks: in its expression. Without receptivity there would be no such objective expression, but it is not reducible to the subject; natural beauty points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. Natural beauty is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that questioningly awaits its solution. (Adorno 2002: 71)

According to Adorno, in the experience of natural beauty, nature or natural elements express to the human subject what they desire from and for themselves in ways where the human subject steps outside herself and perceives nature on its own terms. But this expression is both a task and incomprehensible, thus, requiring translation (Adorno 2002: 73). Nature reveals itself within this expression as longing and with its own emotional states, as Adorno clarifies earlier in the text:

> What nature strives for in vain, artworks fulfil: They open their eyes. Once nature no longer serves as an object of action [that is, as a resource of human (re-)production and appropriation or its own self-preservation, the authors], appearing nature itself imparts expression, whether that of melancholy, peace, or something else. (Adorno 2002: 66)

That nature here requires the human artwork to achieve what it wants already foreshadows the possibility of an inter-ecological comprehension, alongside a central role that art or aesthetics might hold in this comprehension (Hogh 2016; Krebber 2020; Tao 2018).

A concrete fleshing out of what such striving by nature might mean or how it manifests can be found in the work of the ornithologist Richard Prum. In his book *The Evolution of Beauty* (2017), he reconsiders Darwin's widely underappreciated concept of sexual selection. Comparing mating rituals in different bird species, Prum argues that they tell a story of historical female evolutionary agency. He ties the emergence of elaborate courtship displays in species such as birds-of-paradise, bowerbirds and especially lance-tailed manakins to an excitement and preference of female birds for exuberant, showy and vigorous males. Mating acts prove enormously violently submissive in some species. Ducks, for example, are infamous for their multiple acts of rape that even lead to the death of fought-over females. Such behaviour is older in evolutionary terms than the complex and drawn-out courtship in other bird species. Thus, according to Prum, the elaborate courtship rituals emerged as a guard against the risk of assault and rape. Through sexual selection, the birds thereby shape(d) the morphology and social behaviour of their species. However, the agency displayed here (by choosing mating partners) is importantly twofold: on the one hand, the females act to safeguard themselves from harm, but, on the other, they independently from the former also act to intensify their pleasure. Whereas the pursuit of self-preservation, i.e. the reduction of harm, would have resulted in blander, less vigorous males as opposed to the highly exuberant appearance and showy behaviour of the males of the species, enlarging their

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pleasure that they derive from the exuberant males highlights aesthetic pleasures and desires as motivations independent of self-preservation. By channelling the violent energy of males into evermore elaborate, time- and energy-consuming mating displays that preoccupy the males, the female birds pacified the mating act, while equally working towards heightening their pleasure from the more elaborate displays by allowing them to take extended pleasure in the appearance and behaviour of their male contenders. The birds, in other words, make their own species and history in the pursuit of not just self-preservation, but also preferences for aesthetic pleasures that serve no other function, while evolutionary-historically shaping their species' behaviours, morphology and products. Reconnecting Prum's exploration to Adorno, the element of aesthetic preference widens to nature, or more precisely, its myriad entities, pursuing personal desires, whether consciously or unconsciously, that shape both their own biology as well as the ecological communities in which they live.

Walter Benjamin complements Adorno's perspective now (both were, of course, heavily influenced by each other) with a theory of inter-ecological communication and understanding (Bracken 2002; Procyshyn 2014; Schweppenhäuser 1992; Smith 2001). His 1916 essay "*On language as such and on human language*" already makes it explicit in its title that he thought of language not only as a human trait. He further elaborates that:

> The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. (Benjamin 2004: 63)

Accordingly, everything natural or non-human, and not just humans, is also expressive through language, expresses mental content within that language and communicates this content (Gasché 1986). As a consequence, there is also the possibility of understanding non-human expression by humans, as he goes on to argue:

> Through the word, humans are connected with the language of things. The human word is the name of things. Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or cognition of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs. However, the rejection of bourgeois by mystical theory of language likewise rests on a misunderstanding. For according to mystical theory, the word is simply the essence of the thing. That is incorrect, because the thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by a human word. This cognition of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation; rather, the name that man gives to the thing depends on how the thing communicates itself to him. (Benjamin 2004: 69; original emphasis)

Similar to Adorno, Benjamin registers here the capacity of humans to recognize and understand things on their own terms, and, thus, beyond an anthropocentric and anthropogenic bias. All things, furthermore, express themselves in their own medial languages

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that, in turn, can be (and strive towards being) expressed through the human word and language in the name, which is, according to Benjamin, the form of language as such (Benjamin 2004: 67–68; Procyshyn 2014; Smith 2001). Within such reaching of the expression of things into language, humans – and by extension nature and the non-human itself – become reflexive, for in translating the language of things into language as such, humans "cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge [or cognition, i.e. *Erkenntnis*]" (Benjamin 2004: 70; see Gasché 1986).

Benjamin's textual production can generally be subsumed under the effort to bring things, or that what it is that things are in and for themselves, to cognition, a task that he performs by immersing himself into the things and approximating his thinking, language and understanding to the things' own expressions (Procyshyn 2014; Steiner 2010: 42). Representation through language is key to this effort. Through his specific use of language, Benjamin attempts to make concrete, within his language, the things and their being – not to explain them but literally manifest them in what they are according to their very own essence in ways that they become recognizable to us and, thereby, to themselves (Schweppenhäuser 1992: 21–22). Adorno perceived Benjamin's efforts and capacity in this respect as second to none (1977: 242). This effort, however, is not one of simply reading and translating intentions into human understanding – instead, it is surrendering such a human perspective (Gasché 1986).

Such a reading of things and their expression now occurs through and in images, as both Benjamin and Adorno make explicit. Drawing on the work *Adam's First Awakening and First Happy Nights* by the 18th-century German poet Friedrich Maler Müller, Benjamin points out:

> In the same chapter of the poem [the third: Adam's Awakening in Paradise, the authors], the poet expresses the realization that only the word from which things are created permits the human to name them, by [way of that word] communicating itself in the manifold languages of animals, even if mutely, in the image: God gives each animal a sign, whereupon they step before the human to be named. In an almost sublime way, the linguistic community of mute creation with God is thus conveyed in the image of the sign. (Benjamin 2004: 70)

Adorno compresses this insight in *Aesthetic Theory* by stating: "The rhinoceros, that mute animal, seems to say: 'I am a rhinoceros'" (2002: 112; Flodin 2022). Similarly, he echoes and expands on Benjamin in his re-evaluation of natural beauty, by pointing out that the latter's experience "takes recourse to nature exclusively as appearance, never as stuff of labor and the reproduction of life, let alone the substratum of science. Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images" (Adorno 2002). However, precisely in this aesthetic experience, nature "is not perceived as an object of action", i.e. an object on which humans act, but the experience represents a "sloughing off of the aims of self-preservation" (ibid.: 65). According to Adorno, aesthetic experiences of nature foreshadow both a possibility of human-nature relations beyond the instrumentalization of nature for our own self-preservation as well as a recognition of the desires of nature beyond its own self-preservation, and as a sphere governed by more than self-preservation. Aesthetic experience of nature, where aesthetic, it should be noted, exceeds

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the narrow meaning of a theory of art and widens to sensual experiences, hence, becomes the space wherein we can access, perceive and recognize those strivings of nature that exceed both the functionalistic context of its self-preservation and the nature scientifically determinable.

However, as Adorno highlights, there is no immediate reflexive, analytical access to such experiences and images (Krebber 2020).

> The more intensively one observes nature, the less one is aware of its beauty, unless it was already involuntarily recognized. […] Nature's eloquence is damaged by the objectivation that is the result of studied observation […] If nature can in a sense only be seen blindly, the aesthetic imperatives of unconscious apperception and remembrance are at the same time archaic vestiges incompatible with the increasing maturation of reason. Pure immediacy does not suffice for aesthetic experience. Along with the involuntary it requires volition, concentrating consciousness; the contradiction is ineluctable. […] Adequate knowledge of the aesthetic is the spontaneous completion of the objective processes that, by virtue of the tensions of this completion, transpire within it. (Adorno 2002: 69)

Although Adorno focuses his reflection on the experience of beauty in relation to nature, we must assume that the eloquence of nature's expression is equally diminished in other aesthetic experiences of it. Reflexive recognition of nature's expression, hence, cannot be accessed directly or immediately deduced from aesthetic experience. Instead, it requires art, "for in art the evanescent is objectified and summoned to duration" (Adorno 2002: 73) and, thus, becomes analysable and experienceable in a reflexive way. Here, we again complement Adorno's considerations by turning to Benjamin to ask how we might understand and apprehend nature's desires.

Benjamin challenges the European disregard for paintings from the Ming and Qing dynasties in his review of an exhibition of J.-P. Dubosc's (1903–1988) collection of Chinese paintings at the Bibliotèque nationale in Paris in 1937, curated by George Salles (1889–1966). Readily integrating – or rather not even separating in the first place – calligraphy, poetry and painting, Benjamin emphasizes via a quote by the collector that the literati's approach to painting would be completely anathema to literature. Quoting the writer Lin Yutang (1895–1976), Benjamin, furthermore, evinces in relation to Chinese calligraphy

> that practically all the organic forms and all the movements of living beings that exist in nature have been incorporated and assimilated. […] The artist […] seizes upon the stork's thin stilts, the hare's bounding contours, the tiger's massive paws, the lion's mane, the elephant's ponderous walk – and weaves them into a web of magical beauty. (Yutang, quoted in Benjamin 2008: 259)

Most importantly for our consideration of narration as a form of world-making, Benjamin adds that

> Chinese calligraphy […] appears as something eminently in motion. Although the signs have a fixed connection and form on the paper, the many "resemblances" they contain

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> set them moving. Expressed in every stroke of the brush, these virtual resemblances form a mirror where thought is reflected in this atmosphere of resemblance, or resonance. (Benjamin 2008: 259)

Thus, the "image embodies something that is fluid and ever-changing" (ibid.). The literati paintings represent unfolding narratives within themselves. Quoting the exhibition's curator Salles that "in China […] the art of painting is first and foremost the art of thinking" (Salles, quoted in Benjamin 2008: 259), Benjamin eventually highlights a quality in Qing and Ming dynasty paintings that positions them at the intersection of "thought and image" (Benjamin 2008: 259; Gilloch and Kang 2016; Richter 2007). This particular effort and quality places the paintings at the intersection of nature's expression and our aesthetic experience in ways that we might become cognizant of nature's expression(s).

Approaching Nature's Expression through Shanshui Image-making

Diverging from the historical trajectory of optical images in Western literature (Kemp 1990), our project's exploration into the concept of "likeness/意象" (Gao 2018) as evoked by Chinese Shanshui imagery (Sullivan 2008) in today's era of photographic and digital representations commences by intertwining this very notion of likeness with the concept of "expression" in Adorno and Benjamin. The connection, achieved through Benjamin's language of things, intricately binds the realms of the human and the non-human. This relation allows for a nuanced understanding of Shanshui traditions and their relevance in contemporary visual culture. The artistic practice of Shi Tao (1642–1707), a distinguished Chinese Buddhist monk, calligrapher and landscape painter of the early Qing dynasty, provides a model for our artistically contemplative journey (Clunas 2004) (see Fig. 1).

Shi Tao's legacy is encapsulated by the phrase "借古開今", translating to "borrowing the past to open up the present" (Han 2013). This concept serves as a testament to Shi Tao's exceptional ability to repeatedly draw inspiration from historical traditions while forging innovative paths that further open up the field of both image-making and perception. Drawing upon the rich tapestry of Shi Tao's methodologies and frameworks, our reflexive exploration takes a similar turn towards their innovating application in our contemporary creative endeavours. This transition is a deliberate effort to incorporate Shi Tao's insights into our own creative project, seeking to make accessible (and potentially legible) the expressions of nature through a lens that synthesizes tradition and contemporaneity. In doing so, we embark on a transformative journey, where historical legacies intertwine with present situations, providing an alternative framework for understanding and engaging with the expression of nature. Tao's Shanshui images, we want to propose, are profoundly attuned to the natural world, akin to the way the name of a rhinoceros is seemingly suggested to us through non-human expressions. This deep connection grants Tao's Shanshui art a unique permit from nature, allowing for an authentic, symbiotic and interactive relationship, much like a dialogue between the human and the non-human realms. Tao's images achieve this interconnection through four charac-

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teristics derived from Shanshui traditions: perspective, non-space, Shanshui spirit, and action.

(Figure 1:) Shi Tao 1698. Landscape, ink on paper, 136.0 x 58.2 cm. A landscape painting by Shi Tao depicting a serene natural configuration. Source: National Gallery of Viktoria, Melbourne, Australia.

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Diverging from the Western approach to image-making, which often relies on optical technology and scientific precision, Shanshui art defies conventions of singular, static or linear visual perspective (Alpers 1990; Gombrich 1960). Shi Tao's Shanshui images transcend fixed viewpoints, inviting viewers into a dynamic journey through the landscapes depicted. This approach aligns with the literati concept of 卧游 ('wandering and contemplating'), fostering a more immersive and reciprocal dialogue with both nature and the artwork via viewing (Liu 2017).

The deliberate incorporation of blank spaces or non-space in Shanshui images serves an important purpose by creating an appearance of being ostensibly incomplete; the limitations of human understanding and the enigmatic aspects of the universe are revealed from a state of perceived nothingness (Hu 1995). This visual representation of non-space becomes a fertile ground for the nurturing of imagination, offering infinite possibilities for the existence and expression of the non-human and nature.

Beyond the immediate realm of image-making, Shanshui embodies a dynamic mindset known as the *Shanshui spirit* – an open, flowing mental state seeking harmony with the environment (Gao 2020). This mindset acknowledges human partiality, fosters communication with non-human entities and promotes a profound sense of self-orientation within the cosmos.

In traditional Shanshui practice, images are not merely outcomes of representation. Instead, literati artists, such as Tao, emphasize Shanshui action, involving a physical engagement with nature; as such, they are removed from the acting-upon-nature to which Adorno contrasts the aesthetic experience of nature. This experiential approach, as articulated by Shi Tao's mantra "搜尽奇峰打草稿" ('searching for all peculiar peaks to create a preliminary draft'), underscores a dynamic and comprehensive interaction with nature (Su and Hu 2008). The act of active immersion into nature becomes an integral part of the imaging process of nature, inseparable from the creation of art. This connection, as practiced by Shi Tao, unfolds through the expansive medium of creative expression, bridging the gap between the artist and the natural world in a reciprocal dance of creation.

In order to trace the intricate and expressive narratives potentially embedded in nature, we pursue a multistage approach that draws on these Shanshui characteristics, while updating the traditional perspective with the present by bringing it into conversation with technologies such as three-dimensional scanning, XR (Extended Reality) and the construction of interactive environments. In the initial phase, a process was devised that interweaves the key aspects of Shanshui mentioned previously – image, perspective, spirit and action. This process was implemented at Tai Lake in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, a locale of significant environmental and economic importance (Sun et al. 2015). Additionally, in contrast to Suzhou's garden heritage, which highlights human ingenuity, the lake demonstrates a long history of underscoring nature's role in shaping Suzhou's landscape (Henderson 2012).

Our process started with developing a theory of nature's expression from our reading of Adorno and Benjamin. From there, we relied on previously taken, shared boat excursions on Tai Lake. Zhonghao continued the first empirical step of the study over a period of several weeks by placing primed canvases in select locations around Tai Lake. We then discussed and collectively reflected the material gathered, in the form of the canvases, to guide Zhonghao's further artistic treatment of the images. A next step, currently in

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preparation, is to further develop the images in a similar manner into an installation. The process, therefore, is shaped collaboratively by shared reflections and conversations that closely intertwine empirical engagement, critical reflection and artistic production in our attempts to narrate with, rather than about, nature.

In alignment with the philosophy of Shanshui action, we ventured into less explored areas of Tai Lake through kayaking and sailing (see Fig. 2). This active and embodied mode of travel allowed for a relational engagement with the surroundings, presenting a contrasting perspective to traditional modes, such as roads and jet planes, where the processes of viewing and imaging nature become submerged. Most importantly, these excursions opened up the ignored, overlooked and forgotten spaces of Tai Lake – the flip- or backside to the reworked and appropriated materiality of the lake's waterfront, which drowns out any expressions and merely reflects aesthetic experiences of human industry. Of course, we do not want to suggest that the background is not affected by human activity, hardly so. But human industry focuses all its efforts of appropriation and remodelling on the parts of the lake that face human dwellings while deliberately ousting the rest from memory. As a result, the expanse beyond potentially provides a space where nature expressively reacts and responds to its appropriation and submersion precisely because it is deliberately forgotten and, thus, gains space to express itself.

(Figure 2:) Photograph capturing a field research expedition into Tai Lake. Zhonghao Chen 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

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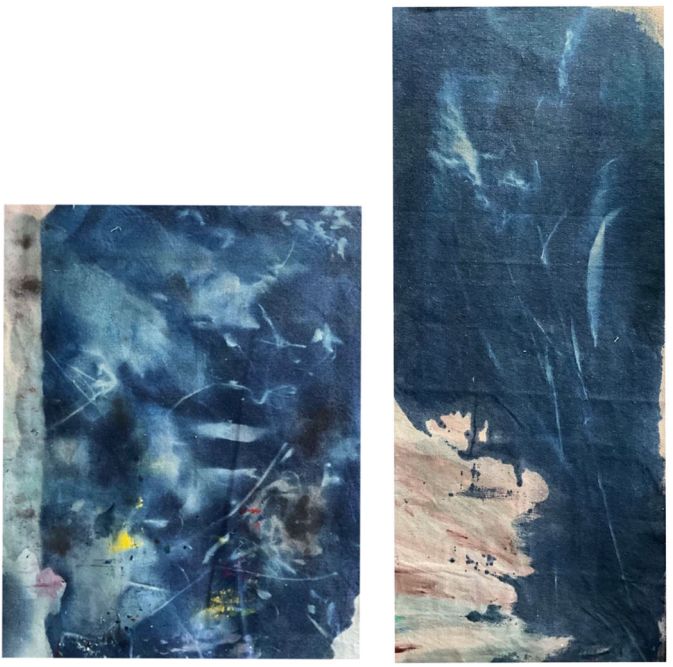
Cyanotypes and assemblage techniques were initially applied to provide a double substrate for the expressivity of nature in the locations engaged (Hooker 1995; Ware 1998). The coated canvases and materials placed onsite created a hypersurface documenting the existence and activities of elements, plants and animals through the interplay of light, time and space. Weathering, including the transformative effect of rain on cyanotypes, added an unexpected dimension where the environment participated in the artistic process with its own ink medium (see Fig. 3). Here, a reversion into naïve realism is most imminent. However, rather than a direct capturing of nature's expression, this step is one of collecting material for artistically further processing, unfolding and bringing out the expression from these utterances by way of Shanshui techniques; nature's expression is the result of this process, not its origin. This painstaking and immersive journey, often spanning days, redefines the role of the image-maker. Collaboration, adaptation and response to an expanding visual sphere and beyond are becoming paramount and highlight the agency of the otherness encountered in the process. This process presents a stark contrast to the classic image-making of the individual human author or artist dominating the visual world at their convenience.

(Figure 3:) Photograph displaying field samples of cyanotype retrieved from the Tai Lake area. Zhonghao Chen 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



Upon completion of the cyanotype process, the canvas, now imbued with an environmental contribution, was relocated to the studio. Close investigations led to the incor-

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poration of painterly interpretations that co-fabricate and -interpret expressions based on the journey imprinted into the image's surface. The canvas was further painted, photographed and digitally developed, continuing the creative process through transmedia procedures (Jenkins and Deuze 2008). Layering and juxtaposition, common strategies in Shanshui painting, were employed to expand the democracy of the documented expressivities in the realm of digital imaging (see Fig. 4 & 5). This process transcended linearity and fixation, constructing a hyperimage that traces diverse narratives of nature's expression (Thürlemann 2019).

(Figure 4:) Zhonghao Chen 2023. Digital Fold in Transition 1, digital artwork. Courtesy of the artist.

(Figure 5:) Zhonghao Chen 2023. Digital Fold in Transition 2, digital artwork. Courtesy of the artist.

In the sense that we have introduced it via Adorno, Benjamin and Shanshui practitioners, this process needs to be perceived as an attempt for us to step back behind our anthropocentric and anthropogenic perspective and let nature express what it wants to say. Adorno makes this explicit, especially in relation to the expression of natural beauty, but it applies to the expression of aesthetic experiences of nature generally:

> Goethe's "Wanderer's Night Song" is incomparable not because here the subject speaks – as in all authentic works, it is, rather, that the subject wants to fall silent by way of the work – but because through its language the poem imitates what is unutterable in the language of nature. (Adorno 2002: 73)

Adorno attests Goethe here that he brings to expression what nature says. This process is not to be understood as a translation in the common sense, however, but rather as a continuation of nature's expression and co-production – co-narration – between nature and the human artist that allows for more than just its translation into human language for us to understand (a translation in the Benjaminian sense, see Gasché 1986). Rather, through human linguistic, intellectual, reflexive capacities, evolved in and through nature but, simultaneously, enabling resistance to the compulsion that the chaotic natural process comprises and drives it forward, nature comes to know itself in ways that its desires (strivings) can be advanced against its own compulsion. It is a *narrating with* nature

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that makes nature's expressed desires visible, accessible and considerable. In this sense, human (artistic) capacities are an extension and continuation of nature, the evolutionarily emerged tool of nature to express its own desires in ways that it becomes possible for them to be activated. Here, then, materializes Adorno's hope for helping nature to attain its wants (2002: 68).

The adaptive and recursive imaging process undertaken in our project, thus, seeks to 'listen' to and bring forth the expression of nature, thereby challenging the prevailing anthropocentric interpretations dominated by linguistic language. The project's culmination envisions transposing these images into the context of an installation. The progressive and expansive nature of our imaging project, extended into the studio environment, facilitates a diverse array of techniques and technologies in addition to field practice in this venture. This expansion extends dialogues between humans and nature through means of image-making and a participative sphere of imaging action, fostering a networked input and distribution. Furthermore, constituting the surficial index into a hyperimage continually unfolds and entangles itself in the domain of image and imaging.

Shifting Relations of Narrative Production

Explorations of narration for recognizing other-than-human contributions involved in the making of the world tend into two directions. On the one hand, they pursue how other creatures make narrative sense out of their world, or how they etch narratives into the places they inhabit. They, thus, attempt to inherit the place of non-human others (plants, organisms, animals) and how they make places their home. On the other hand, they tell stories of cohabitation and -shaping places, i.e. of how the world is one that is always already more-than-human, and, thus, make visible and write into the human world how the world is made not just by humans (Bencke and Bruhn 2022; Donly 2017; Jacobs 2024; Nitzke 2020; van Dooren and Rose 2012; cf. Fenske and Norkunas 2017: 105). Our own experiment expands on these explorations by engaging the relations of production in narration. By recognizing, giving space to and furthering nature's expression in collaboration with nature, we argue to shift these relations and, thereby, provide a crucial opening for nature to become eloquent and make known, in collaboration with the human, its own desires. This, however, then makes potentially visible where to nature wants and strives to go, and, thus, manifests nature's impact and influence on the world's making. The in-progress images presented here as part of our text offer a fragmented entry point into these intentions and crystallization of the project's current phase (see Fig. 4 & 5). Currently and continually folding, transmitting, duplicating and evolving, they showcase documented expressivity from the localities engaged, expressed through a language of things, which is communicated by connecting field research, assemblage, documentation and further artistic expansion in the Shanshui tradition. In this process that is both recursive and expansive, contemplating the sporadic non-space on the image's surface reminds us of human partiality and the otherness embedded in and contributing to this serial of images – a plural Shanshui of our time, a Shanshui that facilitates a multispecies sphere that is co-fabricated and -narrated.

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Both images and envisioned installations aim at expressing nature's longings and desires, while also providing an opportunity to engage nature's expressions, potentially vis-à-vis Tai Lake's human appropriation. In this respect, they are an experiment in narrating *with* nature that contributes a specific way of narrating nature that responds to the narrative challenges that we lay out above. We imagine this form of narration not to be exhausted by merely recognizing a space of *unknowability* though. Instead, if anything, such narration is determining and deciphering the object of knowledge even further. But this deeper infiltration of the object is one of negotiation *with* the object that requires a form of communication and conversation with it – a getting-to-know – that enables the expression of what objects themselves strive for, while working through their nature-scientific determination. Narrating with nature, then, is not a way of understanding nature better or more comprehensively by calculating its unreflexive, automatized functioning from the outside, but by negotiating and communicating with nature in ways that it makes legible whereto it strives to go. Thereby, we focus on the *inter* of interspecies relations in multispecies worlds, environments and socio-ecological communities, while the narration that ensues, in the form of the images, always already considers and has nature's desires and strivings inscribed into them. Thus, it shifts the narrative making sense of the world from narrations where human desires take centre stage and other, non-human desires are hidden, supressed and disregarded, to ones that integrate and bring these latter desires to expression. The artistic process – as the process of narration – is then, furthermore, one of negotiation of different desires, although this does not necessitate their reconciliation; the process can also make visible and retain tensions and contradictions between desires. Precisely by experimenting a narration with nature, our project hopes to challenge established, handed-down, well-rehearsed but thereby also automatically reproduced ways of narrating *about* nature that prove so inadequate today.

We, thus, understand the hindrance for helping nature that is implied in Adorno's promise not in the fact that a co-narration would not yet be possible. Rather, existing (cognitive, capitalistic) relations of production, as they are evinced by Adorno as an obstacle to helping nature, do not allow for the acknowledgement of nature's voice(s) and both recognition and further determining of what it has to say, let alone acting in their accord, and, thus, help nature in attaining what it wants. Nature itself speaks and has always spoken to us, as both Adorno and Benjamin recognize, and Shanshui literati never questioned, and non-human voices have, since their emergence, found continuation in human language and artistic production, but humans have set and hardened narratives of a passive nature and the like against the recognition and furthering of the expression of these voices. By pursuing narration that refuses to talk about nature and insists on letting nature speak, and speak together with nature to make its striving known to itself and the world, our project reflexively shifts the relations of production and, thereby, challenges them beyond art, by both revealing nature as speaking and striving for itself and showcasing different relations of production – without, of course, saying that this already represents the required changes in relations of production towards cultural-ecological production with nature on a societal level.

What our project, hence, presents and aims for is not a narrative determining and rendering in deterministic, fixed, anthropocentric and anthropogenic human terms

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what nature might want, but a practice of narration in which nature is enabled to express what it wants itself. Maintaining this position of narrating with nature is crucial not to fall back into anthropocentric anthropomorphism. What nature might want, then, will potentially be expressed in and through the images and installations that the project yields, which, in turn, provide an opportunity for audiences to engage with nature's expression. Such narration with nature potentially breaks with and resists the reproduction of those approaches to narration that keep us bound to instrumental relations to nature and undermines deterministic views of nature by making nature visible as self-expressing and longing. To be clear, this also leads to a different narrative about nature, of course, but crucially one that is negotiated and continually emerges in collaboration with the object by pursuing a conversation with the objects of knowledge, and that recognizes – and supports – others' desires and strivings in the world beyond functional needs that they also hold.

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