

The Three Ecologies

Sarah Maske

The project *Sandstorm: And Then There Was Dust* is a transnational exhibition dialogue between seven artists from Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. It is also a social and activist (artist) approach to connecting these countries' human and nonhuman ecologies. The project was initiated in 2017, by us, theater and film director Ayat Najafi and curator and scholar Sarah Maske. We met at the conjunction of socially critical, generative, and ecological projects and developed the idea of a transmedia long-term network. The title of the exhibition points to this environmental phenomenon, whose roots and consequences are investigated in the shown artworks. Dust storms arise when a gust front or other strong wind loosens sand and dirt from a dry surface. *And Then There Was Dust* is inspired by a sentence of the bible: "And God said, let there be light and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Humans create deserted and spare regions, which we deprived of water, nutrients, and resources and leave behind transformed; stages for new ecological phenomena. The project examines the manifold forms of ecological processes in the region and looks for a way to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016). In his *Three Ecologies*, French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari developed the theory of Ecosophy, a philosophical approach to ecology that questions the changes in human- and nonhuman- systems and considers three components. In *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari explains that "only an ethico-political articulation – which I call ecosophy – between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) would be likely to clarify these questions." [1] Questions of a good life on this planet. To Guattari, environmental ecology is not isolated but is indeed connected to mental and social ecology. *Sandstorm – And Then There Was Dust* examines these three components in the several artworks in different levels.

Environmental Ecology

Observing the environment allows for a realistic image of the ecological changes caused by human intervention and the resulting consequences. Some of these consequences affect nonhuman actors, as in Mahmoud Obaidi's installation *Turtles* (2005/2020), which examines the disappearance of turtles from the Iraqi wetlands following the drainage of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. In another piece in the exhibition, the pop-up shop *Uranium Generation Design* (2020), Obaidi turns his attention the toll these changes have on human bodies in the form of what appears at first glance to be a trendy shop but upon closer look is filled with objects that consider the increasing deformations happening to human bodies in Iraq. The difficult realities of altered regions are central to the VR and digital piece *Al Mashoof* (2020) by the Tehran Platform (Mehran Davari, Niloufar Najafi, Elmira Shirvani) collective. *Al Mashoof* examines the changes in the Khuzestan wetlands in southwestern Iran, caused in the past few decades by drainage, and the disappearance of the connected human culture. Sinem Dişli also turns her attention to regions around the Euphrates river, examining changes in her home region of the province of Şanlıurfa at the Turkish-Syrian border. In her photographic works *Fields on Fire* (2020) and *Sand in a Whirlwind* (2015) as well as her video work *Manufacturing of the Familiar* (2015), Dişli follows stories of agriculture, of its impact on the soil, and of the resulting ecological phenomena. Through these pieces she renders visual the severity of how humans interact with their ecological surroundings.

Social and Mental Ecology

In a proper observation of ecological changes it is equally important to consider social and mental ecology alongside environmental ecology. Mental ecology implies processes that take place in our heads, like the formation of attitudes and prejudices. This has an important impact on social ecology, which creates ecological dynamics and interactions through the connection of human and nonhuman actors and thus captures the complexity of the world. Negar Farajiani aims to calibrate the mental and social ecology of children in Iran. Her installation *Green Corners* (2020) is a mirror room in which regional plants have been placed. Entering the room, the visitor is confronted with a network of multitudes of reflected plants and faces. *Green Corners* is a visualization of the social workshop she has been going for years and through which she seeks to create such networks. Farajiani is presenting the entirety of her educational work in the publication *Tehran Monoxide*, published by Sandstorm – *And Then There Was Dust* in cooperation with the Dr. Samuel M. Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture at the University of California, Irvine. Also focusing on process, Kerem Ozan Bayraktar will work throughout the exhibition period on the development of a diagram called *How does a vacuum cleaner work* (2020), which seemingly connects knowledge, the production of dust, technical features, and elementary forces. The diagram is an ironic commentary on online explanation videos. His video piece *Rotor* (2020) examines the material character of dust and how it engages with and connects all human and nonhuman actors. Two final works tie all of the exhibition's pieces together. *birbuçuk kolektif* (Ayşe Ceren Sarı, Serkan Kaptan, Yasemin Ülgen) have created an audio commentary that reacts to the exhibited works through several different researchers, adding to them facts, stories, and history with a focus on water as an additional layer. Ayat Najafi presents the multimedia installation *Planting Gilgamesh* (2020), in which he merges old and contemporary interpretations of chapters of the Gilgamesh epic in a sand-and-water environment.

Publication

The texts in this publication, written by different international authors, represent different focal points of the exhibited artworks: biodiversity, borderlessness, desertification, critical geography, Gilgamesh, nonhuman actors, networks and toxins. These thematic connections are highlighted in pink the texts. The publication is structured by Ayat Najafi's poems, which are inspired by the Gilgamesh epic (ca. 2000 BC-7 BC) as well as the documentary *The Lovers' Wind* (1978) by the French director Albert Lamorisse, and use entire passages of both of these old stories, reviving them in print.

In his poems Najafi lets the winds speak, from South, East, North, and West, from the fire storm, to the flood, the earthquake to the tornado. The wind is thus our main protagonist.

Notes

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1 Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 27.