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MESH Leaf III.1

*Project Reports from the
Environmental Humanities*
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A Joyful Stroll into Microworlds — Exploring What Remains Unnoticed

A Joyful Stroll into Microworlds — Exploring What Remains Unnoticed was part of the *Multispecies Storytelling Pop-up Exhibition* on October 19, 2024 in Cologne, Germany. The exhibition featured the works of participants in the Autumn Academy for Planetary Wellbeing organized by MESH, EUniWell, and BRIDGES.

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Our exhibition project explores joy as a powerful response to eco-anxiety. With joy as our guiding theme, we were inspired by Jakob von Uexküll's invitation to take a "stroll into unfamiliar worlds; worlds strange to us but known to other creatures, manifold and varied as the animals themselves" (Uexküll 1992, p. 319). Following this idea, we sought to explore often-overlooked ecosystems around us, immersing ourselves in the worlds of small nonhuman creatures. When we started our group work, the idea quickly emerged that we wanted to position ourselves as something of an antipole – acknowledging the crises on this earth and the associated eco-anxiety while deliberately seeking joy as a counterpoint. Our idea was to

see joy, to feel it, to revel in joy despite all the crises.

Bennett (2001) speaks of cultivating an affective force that arises in moments of enchantment and can sharpen sensory receptivity to the wondrous particularity of things (ibid., pp. 3–4). Turning toward enchantment or joy thus also means resisting the history of disenchantment of the world. For it is precisely this feeling of disenchantment that has driven the world into its current crisis, fostering the belief that there is no future worth preserving (von Redecker 2023, p. 119). Our project could be seen as an attempt to counteract the crisis of our relationship with the



Figure 1. Our group microscoping the soil samples

living world to rediscover joy in convivial and entangled coexistence (Morizot, 2024).

Inspired by the stories of Thom van Dooren (2022), the idea of seeing what often remains unseen was born: those micro-worlds around us we are mutually dependent on. We collected soil in different parts of Cologne (e.g., under an apple tree in a garden or in the city centre). A digital microscope helped us get closer to the life of the microworlds on our stroll. First attempts, shaky pictures and suddenly: joy, delight, enthusiasm: “Hi there! Little Fellows.” The joy and enchantment of this moment did not remain silent: we shared the joy of this encounter. Wonder, admittedly also moments of disgust, but above all wonder and shared joy. A place of conviviality, divided by a 1000-fold zoom of a digital microscope.

But there were also the samples in which the microscopic stroll did not give rise to any joy or enchantment. Dying earth? No life? No crawling, scurrying, hiding, no little friends. Earth from the city centre, trampled flat, probably full of pollution and poison. A previously life-giving system – dead! Von Redecker (2023) writes: “The soil is alive” (ibid., p. 125). In a handful of soil, there are more living beings than humans on this planet, and these beings create the conditions for the food we eat and the air we breathe (ibid., p. 127). We are existentially dependent on these creatures.

The same applies to another species whose microworld remains largely hidden to the human eye and that we explored during the project. We’re talking about plankton – microorganisms that make up over 90 percent of life in the world’s oceans in terms of biomass. An enormously versatile species that displays the most amazing shapes, colors and environmental adaptations and forms the basis of life inside and outside the water, feeding multitudes of species and producing 50 to 70 percent of the earth’s total oxygen per year. Phytoplankton can therefore be seen as essential for the balance of water ecosystems and the atmosphere in general.¹

Unfortunately, our microscope could not visualize the potential microorganisms living in a water sample that we brought along from a nearby pond (Aachener Weiher); but a few facets of this multifaceted species can be examined in the online exhibition *Plankton Chronicles*.² One of our group’s approaches was to take the joy of this species as an opportunity to reflect on plankton as a metaphor in a self-written song that was also played during the exhibition of the project.

¹ According to GEOMAR Helmholtz-Zentrum für Ozeanforschung Kiel (see among others: “[Was Phytoplankton-Physiologie mit dem Weltklima zu tun hat](#)”, Press release dated October 13, 2023; DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adg1725, last accessed March 14, 2025)

² See <https://planktonchronicles.org/en/>, last accessed March 14, 2025.



Figure 2. Earth dweller from one of our samples under the microscope

“Plankton” comes from the Greek word *planktos*, which means wandering or drifting. It refers to creatures that cannot move by themselves but are driven by the movement of water. The song *Plankton* builds on the fascination for this quality, expressing the desire to be able to let go and be like plankton in the open sea. It tries to illustrate the idea that sometimes it's about remembering that we are all just small little beings in the grand scheme of the universe – and that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously.

At the same time, the song tries to emphasize that plankton are by no means just small, insignificant creatures, but the opposite, as mentioned above: they form the basis of our lives, binding an enormous amount of CO₂. The aim and message of the song is therefore also to contribute to an environmental awareness that acknowledges Plankton as a significant climate factor – a joyful way of telling: *Be like plankton, save the earth!*

This awareness comes with responsibility. As Sandra Díaz described in her lecture during the *MESH Autumn Academy for Planetary Wellbeing*, considering humans as “gardeners”, the entire planet is our shared garden – one we have shaped, often harmed, and now must learn to care for in new ways. Paying attention to these overlooked forms of



Figure 3. Group presentation during the exhibition – listening to the Plankton song

life is not only an act of curiosity but of ethical responsibility. This desire for proximity, to connect with them and try to see the world through their existence, shaped our project. Yet in doing so, we also confronted the limits of our understanding.

While joy and enchantment drew us closer to these unseen worlds, we remained aware of a fundamental difference: we can never fully inhabit their perspective. This touches on the limits of anthropomorphism – the tendency to interpret nonhuman beings through human categories. As much as we strive to understand and feel with these creatures, our connection is always mediated by our own human experience. Acknowledging this difference does not weaken our bond but rather strengthens our commit-

ment to careful, respectful engagement (Bennett, 2024, pp. 196–201).

In conclusion, turning affirmatively and joyfully toward the living (often invisible) world can be seen as an insight from our project, counteracting the "ontological degradation of the living" (Morizot, 2024, p. 35) and the "disappearance of our plural, affective, active affiliations with other living beings, animals, and environments" (ibid., p. 36). Engaging with the convivial community of life in the soil and water has allowed us to experience enchantment, joy, and gratitude, while also revealing our reciprocal responsibility toward the entangled life around us. Or, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (2023) puts it: "Sustain those who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever" (p. 214).

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