Chapter 5

(Re)imagining reality

For years now, I had been emerging from an outlandish sleep to discover the world and I detached from one another's realities. This was not the private sleep that nightfall and temperament determine but a kind of generational amnesia from which thousands of us were waking to find that what we'd taken for reality was the stunned edges of stupor.

Melanie Challenger in Dark Mountain*, issue 2, p. 6*

The experiential and historical relation between Logos and Mythos is described in psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist's (2009) remarkable book *The Master and His Emissary*. Through an extensive investigation of the asymmetry between the two brain hemispheres, McGilchrist describes how the nature of the attention brought to bear on the world shapes what *kind* of world is attended to, and experienced, in the first place[1]. Drawing on a wide array of psychology and cognitive studies and contextualising his findings in the history of philosophy, his achievement is to show how a persistent attending through abstraction, categorisation, and representation in Western thought – modes of knowing described as Logos-centric in the previous chapter – has led to a dominant way of seeing the world which is characterised by conceptualisation, rationalism and disembodiment. His findings have important implications for understanding the role of the imagination in bringing forth particular realities. Reviewing how *mimesis*, the capacity for imitation, is key to individual and cultural development, McGilchrist describes how imitating, imagining, and actually doing something share the same neural foundations. In this way, the imagination "is not a neutral projection of images on a screen. We need to be careful of our imagination, since what we imagine is in a sense what we are and who we become" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 250).

Inhabiting a different reality in the imagination and beginning to embody these stories

---

[1]McGilchrist is careful not to essentialise the differences between the two brain hemispheres and emphasises the need to see the different ways in which the left and right hemisphere construe the world in the light of the modes of attention they embody rather than definitive and differential brain functions.

in the lifeworld is key to the personal re-narration of the lifeworld that takes place within the Dark Mountain Project. Viewed as a collective inquiry into onto-epistemological assumptions which move beyond the meta-narrative of progress, there is an emphasis on understanding how stories frame reality and particular ways of seeing. In this chapter, I describe the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry where distinct but overlapping circles of conversations have formed and examine some of the main questions participants deal with in this endeavour. Building on the foregoing discussion this chapter examines the questions about how sustainability narratives inform modes of knowledge and agency and how they are expressed in worldviews and actions. It does so through examining the alternative narrative framing of the Dark Mountain Project and showing how this positions participants narratively 'between stories'. From this position personal narratives emerge from the interactions and practices that unfold: by reworking a personal narrative framing and engaging in different forms of creative practice, mountaineers begin to imagine and embody other ways of seeing.

5.1   Finding community

GQ: What characterises the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry and why do people join the conversations?

In August 2011 I travelled down to the Sustainability Centre in Hampshire for the second Uncivilisation festival to get a feel for whether the Dark Mountain Project could be a case study in my research. The programme consisted of talks and workshops with titles such as 'Collapsonomics', 'On extinction', 'We can no longer afford to ignore the sacred', 'Living on the edge – and by the word', 'New myths for new worlds', 'Wild writing' and 'Visions of transition'. I was interested in finding out why people had come to this kind of festival and what the Dark Mountain Project meant to them. Roger, an architect and boat enthusiast who stayed in the tent next to me, told me: "sometimes one can feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world, and I go away from this [festival] feeling less overwhelmed, and thinking 'no, perhaps all these ideas I have aren't so silly after all, and I should carry on pursuing them' [. . .] There are projects which I want to start getting moving which will. . . coming here makes me feel more like I am going to do them" (RB I-C, 20.08.11). My other festival neighbour, Ana, said: "For me Dark Mountain is a meeting point where. . . really, the main point is listening, is hearing other people. Seeing how they do things, and then how that can help me do my thing" (AB I-C, 21.08.11). During the session 'The Dark Mountain Project: what next?' on the last day of the festival I heard a variety of opinions about what Dark Mountain is and what the participants thought it could do (PK DH A-R, 21.08.11). Some people felt that there was a need to formulate more clear political views and focus on creating a movement for social change. Others talked of it as 'the literary wing of Transition'. One person expressed how she felt that the Dark Mountain Project balanced an intellectual and spiritual response to climate change. There was a general sense that what was unique about Dark Mountain was how it 'facilitated a

space to look at questions differently' and 'enabled conversations about what we actually think and feel' about the world (see also REM, 30.08.11).

As a space of inquiry where there is a focus on 'having conversations differently', as Cat Lupton expresses it in the previous chapter (CL P-I, 20.12.12), the conversations take different forms in talks, workshops, performances, local meetings, online fora, the journal and artistic work. In this way, the Dark Mountain Project is a network of participants who take part in different kinds of conversations, at different times and with different levels of engagement. Seeing Dark Mountain as a community of inquiry therefore implies many circles of conversation that intertwine but do not always include the same participants or topics. And because participants have very personal and differentiated experiences within Dark Mountain their descriptions of what it is and means also vary. Inquiries or conversations revolve around the conditions and concepts which structure personal lives: ideas about relationships and family, career and work, nature and wildness, loss and personal identity, modes of interaction and organisation. This is not dissimilar to the questioning that is taking place within environmentalist movements (e.g. Deep Green Resistance and the Transition movement) and other cultural critiques (e.g. critical and postmodern) that in some sense react against industrial civilisation. However, whereas many of these explicitly aim to find solutions or strategies, inquiries within Dark Mountain tend to ask questions about whether it is possible to avoid seeing contemporary problems as issues which need to be 'solved' in the first place. This is one of the defining features of the Dark Mountain Project. Charlotte Du Cann, who has been a long-time participant in both the Transition movement and the Dark Mountain Project, says:

> For me Transition is about, I think I described it in a blog I wrote once, it's the village. It's ordinary life, it's your ordinary dealings with people. Whereas Dark Mountain is very much the artist. It could be the artist in the community but it is not the same as being in the community. I think we need both. I think if you are just the artist you're on the outside all the time. And if you are just in the community you are dealing with things on a very humdrum level. Which, as a writer, doesn't satisfy me completely. For me to be whole, or to answer the whole story, both need to be there (CDC P-I, 23.04.13).

As 'the artist', there is a deliberate focus on process, creativity and emergence (see e.g. O-D, 14.09.12). That the Dark Mountain Project is not a member organisation with a formal structure for participation but a platform for interaction is important for understanding the various conversations, events and collaborations that have grown from it.

The shared experience of inquiring about alternative ways of seeing connect individuals within circles of conversation which explore different ways of understanding and relating to various aspects of living with social-ecological crises. Many participants express a sentiment that inquiring into the stories and assumptions that have come to be taken for granted in the dominant meta-narrative of progress opens up for an encounter with ways of seeing which give new meaning to the lifeworld (see also section 5.7). For some, this is a potential entry point for a transformation in personal identity, a powerful experience

which sometimes sees the beginning of friendships and further collaboration between participants in the inquiry (see e.g. Figure 5.1). These are not effortless or light conversations and require a degree of readiness but for people who are actively seeking this kind of conversation the experience is often one of solace. A salient reason for the flourishing of 'uncivilised' art and writing in the wake of the publication of the Dark Mountain manifesto can be found in the space it opened up for conversations about thoughts and emotions which previously had no means of expression in mainstream discourses about social-ecological crises (cf. section 4.2). And therefore one of the primary topics that has emerged in Dark Mountain inquiries is the psychological implications of living in an age characterised by such immense issues like global pollution, species extinctions and climate change.

Figure 5.1: The hearth. Own photo.

5.2 The reality of collapse

GQ: What is the experiential and psychological significance of the Dark Mountain Project's narrative of the 'collapse of civilisation'?

As described in the previous chapter, participants' first encounter with the Dark Mountain Project is often related to a disruption of their personal outlook or circumstances in connection with coming to terms with the prospects of social-ecological crises. This points to an important feature of many of the conversations that follow from participation in the Dark Mountain Project: they tend to proceed from a destabilisation of particular assumptions about the future. *Uncivilisation's* framing of the present age as one where 'familiar restraints are being kicked away' and 'foundations snatched from under us' opens up for conversations about what makes sense in the face of the 'end of the world as we know it' and the gradual 'collapse of civilisation'. The scale and overwhelming complexity of this framing can be both unsettling and disorienting; it can create a turbulence within familiar ways of thinking which is both emotionally difficult and psychologically disconcerting (see e.g. REM, 25.08.12). But the framing of collapse allows giving up hope or expectation – at least momentarily – and come to terms with the reality that cultures, languages, creatures and habitats are disappearing at a rate which has very few precedents in Earth's history, often replaced only by an eery silence and a destitute landscape (DMB, 17.10.13). While this is not an easy process, it is an important psychological experience with parallels to Randall's (2009) work on dealing with loss. In this sense, the framing of collapse involves denial and acceptance in different measures in a process of realising that certain things we value now are disappearing for good. From the perspective of the individual lifeworld, the frame of an ongoing 'collapse' should be seen as real insofar as its acceptance means it is gradually embedded and enacted in the life narratives, cognitive frames, and metaphoric webs which constitute social reality (cf. sections 2.2 and 2.3). And this shift in the imagination away from seeing the future as progress profoundly affects 'what we are and who we become', as McGilchrist articulates it above.

So while the perspective of collapse is seemingly reflected in major contemporary issues such as climate change, economic recession, austerity politics, species extinctions, industrial pollution and increasing resource scarcity, it should not be seen simply as a claim about, or analysis of, material reality. Rather, it implies a dissolution of a particular imagination of the future and the gradual cessation of associated concepts, meanings and beliefs. In this way, collapse is also a breakdown in the validity and meaning of some of the concepts and constructs which have previously made sense of reality and shaped a course of life. This applies to the wider cultural realm where concepts and narratives framed by progress are increasingly failing to explain the course of history as well as the individual lifeworld where particular life aspirations are no longer feasible in the face of changing socio-economic conditions (see section 5.3). This 'collapse of meaning' implies a sort of conceptual vacuum where faltering ideas no longer do work in making sense of the world (AT P-I, 31.03.21). And it is this space that the Dark Mountain Project sets out

to explore in its commitment to "face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19). As described earlier, insofar as collapse is a moment of realisation that the future portrayed by the meta-narrative of progress is failing it is not a fully formed counter-narrative but rather a framing that questions the assumptions progress projects onto the future (see e.g 5.2 for an artistic expression). It is, in the words of Paul Kingsnorth, a "realisation that everything is changing, it is not going to go back to how it was. And in some ways things are falling apart in ways that we can't quite pin down. We don't know what the results will be but we better start taking it seriously" (PK P-I, 11.05.12). This implies accepting that certain aspects of contemporary life are changing irrevocably as the consequences of social-ecological crises manifest in lived reality.

Figure 5.2: Moment from 'Funeral for a Lost Species'. Performance by Feral Theatre, *Uncivilisation* **2012. Own photo.**

The acceptance of collapse is the most contentious and provocative position of the Dark Mountain Project. Prominent critics and academics have interpreted this acceptance as 'practically unthinkable' (Gray 10.09.09), 'flawed' (Adams 2014) and 'conceit' (Hogget 2011). If *Uncivilisation* is read as an expression of defeatism or catastrophism, and the rhetoric of uncivilising is interpreted as escapism or a rejection of worldly life, such proclamations would not be off the mark. But there is another possibility: reading the manifesto as an expression of a complete disillusionment with civilisation as a system of belief and an honest acceptance of its demise – for good and for bad. It is in this manner that the question *what du you do, after you stop pretending?* should be understood, and the ability to ask that question honestly is perhaps the best gauge to whether someone

will find the narrative framing of the Dark Mountain Project compelling. Accepting collapse, and engaging with uncivilisation as a response to that acceptance, first of all means questioning the meta-narratives of progress and civilisation. But it does not necessarily imply inaction, survivalism or utopian striving for another world. The issue of acceptance presents critics and participants in the Dark Mountain Project with a dilemma as they are speaking across fundamentally different assumptions, beliefs and narrative frames which cannot be reconciled and, thus, many of the early debates between mountaineers and non-participants were characterised by fundamental disagreements and misunderstandings. This also points to another important psychological aspect of collapse which is that, in this narrative frame, lived reality is qualitatively different from the social expressions and aspirations of the dominant culture. Psychologist and counsellor Steve Thorp speaks about 'psychological collapse' as an unspoken aspect of social-ecological crises that is largely ignored or invalidated by mainstream culture but which can be an entry point for re-narrating the lifeworld through facing those aspects of life that cannot be controlled (ST P-I, 16.07.12). As a narrative which not only tells a radically different story about the future but holds that the future *cannot be known* with the accuracy and certainty that the meta-narrative of progress proclaims, collapse repositions human subjectivity and agency in relation to the natural world and asks questions about the deeper values inherent to contemporary society.

In this way, the contention of the collapse narrative that global issues like climate change is not a 'problem in need of a solution' is a contestation of the thinking and values that underpin recent political paradigms like ecological modernisation, new public management and the inverted entrepreneurialism of the Big Society. The claim is that it is the thinking and values inherent to such managerial approaches which constitute the 'problem' by reproducing those logics and value-systems that created the social-ecological crises and which now spell 'the end of the world as we know it'. As an expression of an 'apocalyptic' imagination (cf. Skrimshire, 2010b), the collapse narrative is a challenge to the values, practices and strategies which characterise 'risk thinking' as an approach to the future based on managerialism, control and technical-rational solutions (Groves, 2010) – see also sections 6.2 and 6.3. This challenge goes to the core of modernist assumptions about the relationship between the past, present and future. In this way, the framing of collapse poses deep ethical questions about how to relate both to the current consumerist culture and those future generations which will live in its shadow. If the future is characterised not by progress but by the foundering and transformation of many current institutions and modes of organisation, what do we want to nurture today and to carry with us into the future?

The scale and implications of collapse in its broadest framing at the level of civilisation are of a magnitude and complexity that are impossible to entirely grasp, and the disjunction between the temporalities of everyday life and the much larger time scales of global social-ecological change obscures the different causal chains which connect the infrastructures that support civilised life with processes of resource depletion, pollution and degradation of natural habitats. In this context, collapse is a framing which asks questions

about how to respond to conditions of uncertainty, dissolution of meaning and the disintegration of some of the social structures which characterise modern life. This also makes the framing of collapse an important psychological notion which requires recognition and attention. This was an underlying theme in many of my interview-conversations and the stories that participants told would often include elements of mourning and despair. In parallel with Randall's (2009) work on the psychology of loss, Thorp holds that: "[t]o me it's a necessary response. But I don't see despair as a path to anywhere and I don't think we have to work through it" (ST P-I, 16.07.12). Acknowledging loss and despair seems requisite for dealing with the framing of collapse psychologically. In his practice as a philosophical counsellor, Andrew Taggart finds that the experience of deep changes in the social order causes confusion and 'stuttering' when it comes to describe lived reality. He describes this as a response to the discrepancy between the concepts used to describe one's own life and social reality:

> ... the speculative thesis would be that you'd see a lag in which social reality has actually moved ahead of the concepts we're using still [...] it very well could be the case that the idea of a 'career' is just one particular concept that could no longer really make sense of most of social and economic life. And yet people hold on to it as a structuring narrative. That's creating a pretty profound sense of disquiet for those who still hold onto it as a way of being in the world, despite its distinct impossibility for most... (AT P-I, 31.03.21)

The significance and meaning of collapse at the level of the individual lifeworld depends entirely on personal circumstances, attitudes and beliefs. But as a narrative framing which affects the experience and enactment of reality it should not be dismissed as unreal – it is part and parcel of a reorienting and re-positioning of the individual lifeworld within the context of social-ecological crises (see e.g. Figure 5.3 for an artistic expression).

As such, it entails reconciliation with the future lost and those cultures and creatures that are irrevocably disappearing. Loss is also a central theme running through the Dark Mountain journals and events, it has inspired poetic invocations like Nick Hunt's 'Loss Soup' (Hunt DM1) and ceremonial performance rites like the 'Liturgy of Loss' at the 2013 Uncivilisation festival. In my interview-conversations there were several references to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) work on the five stages of grief, which she developed through her work with terminally ill patients. Kübler-Ross describes a general pattern in the patients' coping with death beginning with denial, going through anger, bargaining, and depression until arriving at acceptance. While the psychology of loss is clearly more complex than simply passing through set stages of grief, many mountaineers describe the process of coming to terms with collapse in similar terms. This can be a difficult process in the context of a mainstream culture which does not acknowledge the perspective of collapse. Dougie Strang says:

> ... we're all carrying the burden of it. I don't know if you feel that but it's there, weighing down on our psyche, and most people in our culture are completely ignoring it. Either

wilfully or ignorantly, despite the news, the dramatic increase in extreme weather events, the unfolding ecological collapse. I don't think as a thinking species we've faced this before (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

Having a community to offer companionship, clarity and support in dealing with this experience is invaluable. My own experience of coming to terms with collapse has been protracted and I recognise both bargaining and resistance to acceptance in the process. It has involved a confrontation with my own acculturation to optimism and a gradual easing into acknowledging the many things I cannot do anything about despite my urge to change them (REM, 25.08.12). But if we only assume disillusionment is a tragedy and we recoil from it, we miss a kind of *joyful disillusionment*, as Tony Dias remarks (TD P-I, 25.10.12). Letting go of the urge, need or feeling of responsibility to 'save' the world can bring a sense of relief and joy when action ceases to be based in guilt – "the world is not ours to save, as it quite possibly is not ours to completely destroy" as blogger and mountaineer Daniela Othieno puts it (Othieno 31.01.12, na.). While the big frame of a global sort of 'unravelling' provokes both feelings of despair and joy, it brings up new questions about how to navigate the uncertainties that arise from accepting the failure of the meta-narrative of progress. This suggests that when the narrative framing begins to shift the lifeworld gradually begins to look different, which poses the question: what sort of future life does collapse imply?
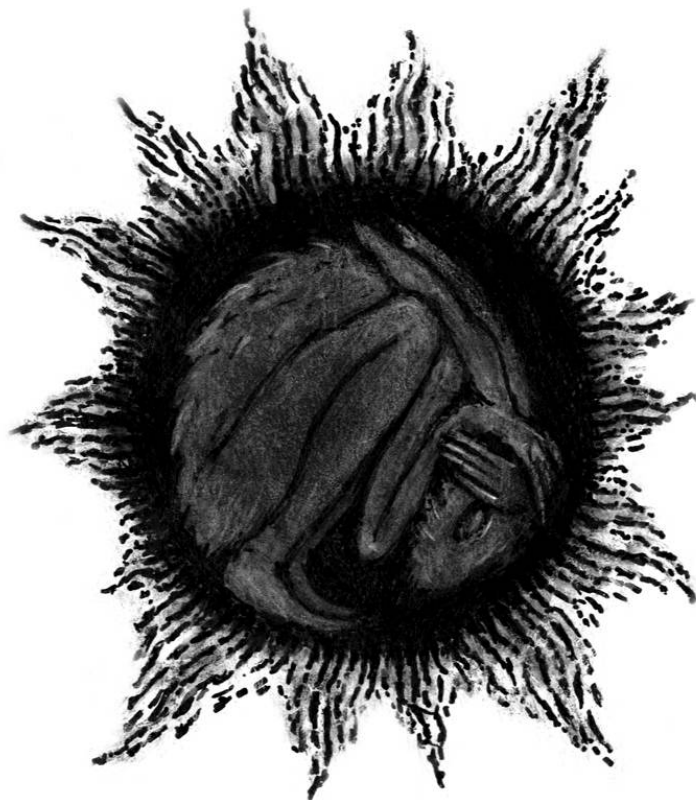

Figure 5.3: Mat Osmond, 'Hare'. Mixed media drawing on paper, 2013.

5.3   Descending into the future

GQ: How does the Dark Mountain narrative frame the future and how does this position individuals narratively?

The framing of collapse has its roots in the archeology and history of past civilisations as well as analyses of the logic inherent to the idea of progress. Ideas of civilisational collapse have been explored from various perspectives such as historian Arnold Toynbee's (1961) theory of decay, anthropologist Joseph Tainter's (1990) framework of civilisations as complex systems, and popular science writer Jared Diamond's (2005) accounts of reduced carrying capacities. Collapse as a present phenomenon has also recently begun to attract wider attention among academics and researchers as seen by a string of publications on this theme including astrophysicist Martin Rees' (2003) 'final century', studies on abrupt climate change such as the 2003 Pentagon report (Schwartz and Randall, 2003), James Howard Kunstler's notion of the 'long emergency' (2005), professor Guy McPherson's writing on resource depletion (e.g. 2011), Richard Heinberg's work on energy decline (e.g. 2007), Leahy *et al.*'s (2010) social research, Ehrlich and Ehrlich's (2013) recent article in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, and the recent study in *Ecological Economics* on the scenario of civilisational collapse (Motesharrei *et al.*, 2014). While there is no shortage of speculations about the imminent collapse of civilisation both in print and on the internet, many analyses fall into the dualistic narrative framework described in section 4.7. If collapse is seen as a frame which renders the future uncertain and unpredictable, hard claims about future events based on model projections are unfeasible. Nonetheless, by observing trends unfolding on longer time scales and understanding aspects of their inherent dynamics it is possible to see the contours of a future which, although unknowable, contains hints to the drift of history in the coming decades – because some things, like radioactive decay and the production rate of certain resources, are well-established and non-negotiable.

   To avoid falling into a dualistic understanding of collapse as the negation of civilised life and the arrival of apocalypse, it is necessary first to sidestep the understanding of history framed as progress: as a series of improvements leading from a primitive past to present civilisation and onwards into a future which yields solutions to contemporary problems through better knowledge and technology. This can be difficult because notions of progress have become unconscious assumptions: belief in progress has "ramified and hardened into an ideology – a secular religion which, like the religions that progress has challenged, is blind to certain flaws in its credentials. Progress, therefore, has become 'myth' in the anthropological sense" (Wright, 2005, p. 4)[2]. In other words, progress frames reality according to its inherent narrative logic which is largely unconscious and

---

[2]Wright does not here mean to say that myths are inherently untrue, rather that they are "maps by which cultures navigate through time" (2005, p. 4). The view of progress as a 'secular religion' should be understood primarily in terms of this map being based on indisputable beliefs and not as a claim about a historical secularisation of religious doctrine (see e.g. Wallace, 1981). This is discussed further in section 6.2.

yet structures how the world is perceived. Wright describes this internal logic as 'progress traps': extrapolating what works well in a given context to ever larger scales, the reasoning of progress entails unintended consequences which deepen and accelerate over time (i.e. solutions that appear to be improvements in one context introduce new problems that extend beyond the resources or knowledge available). Comparing different civilisations, cultures, technologies and social-ecological systems, he describes how this logic has persistently undermined itself and eventually led to a collapse of the societies that depend upon it. This historical account of the logic of progress is key to understanding *Uncivilisation's* contention that current social-ecological crises are not problems in need of solutions: technological advances do not solve individual problems without creating further complexity and unforeseen outcomes which will require new solutions. John Michael Greer's (2013) explanation of progress as a civil religion and cultural myth (see also section 6.2) complements Wright's analysis of the logic of progress with a psychological investigation of how progress has gained traction by providing a cosmology which explains human destiny as one of salvation and projects this redemption into the future.

Greer is one of the early writers on collapse and a respected voice within the Dark Mountain Project whose humorous and polemical writings centre around the psychological, spiritual and material implications of the end of industrial civilisation. His prolific writings present a fascinating and incisive entry point to the challenges of peak oil and resource scarcity and their potential implications for energy-intensive societies and future generations. Greer describes belief in the myth of progress – being a central source of meaning and a justification of life in contemporary society – as pushing collective human activities in directions which are deeply unsustainable, so much so that they are now faltering. In *The Long Descent* (2008b) Greer introduces the idea of 'catabolic collapse' which envisions a slow decline from contemporary civilisation into something more akin to earlier agrarian societies. He contends that collapse will not be a rapid, catastrophic event which will change the world all at once but a series of ongoing and inter-related crises that will gradually render high consumption lifestyles impossible. While the social prospects of collapse are grim – Greer describes the four main impacts likely to characterise catabolic collapse as declining energy availability, economic contraction, collapsing public health and political turmoil – the nature of this descent will depend on the ability to let go of many of the expectations and wants which arise from the idea of progress. As one generation gets poorer than the one before it in material terms, assumptions and ideas about wealth and prosperity will begin to change and so will the societal narrative. This basic analysis can be found in various forms within the Dark Mountain Project (see e.g. PK P-I, 11.05.12).

While this broad framing of collapse – here re-presented in a single paragraph – does not say much about the ability of new technologies to offset some of the immediate impacts of rising energy prices and resource scarcity in particular regions, it illustrates how collapse can be imagined outside the meta-narrative of progress. And a critical aspect of this view of collapse as a slow decline is that it is not a deterministic process: *how* it happens makes all the difference. Ran Prieur reflects on this:

> The more we are forced to abandon this system, the less we will learn, and the more aggressively we will fight to rebuild something like it. And the more we choose to abandon it, the more we will learn, and the less likely we will make the same mistakes (Prieur DM1, p. 130).

But Prieur does not say that 'abandoning the system' is currently a possibility on any large scale. One of Greer's (2013) main points is that living with progress as a structuring societal narrative makes it very hard to abandon – this is one of the core rationales that makes collapse plausible in the first place. The framing of progress makes it psychologically difficult to understand crisis as anything but a temporary aberration and for a long time it is simply unmentionable. Greer describes how rather than addressing the traps and flaws of progress as a central cultural myth, modern societies collectively find ways to avoid dealing with them. Drawing parallels to fictional, but historical, disorders like 'drapetomania' (the supposed compulsion of slaves to run away from home) and the 'housewife syndrome' (lethargy in women bound to their domestic lives), Greer suggests that social-ecological crisis is currently being redefined in personal terms: as the fault or lack of skills on part of the individual (this is similar to academic analyses such as Hobson, 2004).

This points to a key aspect of collapse as a framing of the future: irrespective of how accurately this narrative is perceived to describe current conditions, the lived reality of the future will to a large degree depend on the extent to which societies can collectively cope with the absence of progress and imagine a different kind of social reality. Engineer and collapse thinker Dmitry Orlov, who appears in *Dark Mountain* issue 3, observes that trust and meaning are key to the eventual depth and scale of collapse. In his book *The Five Stages of Collapse* (2013) he connects the various phases of collapse which he anticipates with the degree to which trust and faith in the status quo are undermined (the five stages of collapse are: financial, commercial, political, social and cultural). He sees the framing of collapse as a "challenge to most of the notions we received as part of our schooling and socialization" (ibid., p. 261). This connects directly with the idea of uncivilising as a process of unlearning and it entails revisiting history as a movement of progress: in this way, the past is no longer devalued but a source of learning. Importantly, this exploration and re-imagining has to arise from a personal desire or disillusionment. As acupuncturist and scholar Steve Wheeler points out in his interview with the anarchist philosopher John Zerzan: "... you can't force this on people. It's commonplace in therapy, even if you know a certain change would be good for people, you can't force them to do it, you have to just create a space for them to move into" (Wheeler and Zerzan DM4, p. 198). A central difficulty for collapse as a narrative framing is to open up such spaces in the imagination rather than closing them down by claiming that history is locked into a specific course within the range of possibilities it describes in its challenge to the meta-narrative of history as progress (I will return to this issue in section 6.2).

There is a wide range of possible scenarios for a future characterised by collapse in addition to those discussed here. As macro-narratives of the 21st century they trace the edges of human understanding and abilities to foresee the future in the face of uncertainty

and complexity. The indicators collapse thinkers employ to build their narratives – such as resource availability, environmental change, consumption patterns, pollution levels, financial instability, and cultural developments – are best understood as providing a 'topography of collapse', a landscape where certain features are clearer than others but where the details of particular events remain unknowable. In this landscape, the Dark Mountain Project contends that cultural upheaval is a central element and, insofar as mountaineers are trying to change anything, their effort is directed at the narratives of progress which explain social-ecological crises as temporary or an irregularity. Instead, Dark Mountain maintains that crises will be a defining feature of the coming decades and the cultural plight is to learn how to live with this fact (see e.g. Figure 5.4 for an artistic expression). How it plays out is impossible to say but the framing of collapse makes it possible to think differently about it – see e.g. Dougald Hine's collaboration on The Institute For Collapsonomics[3]. And it positions the individual very differently by overturning the certainties of the meta-narrative of progress. As Cat Lupton observes: "It's knowing that the overall picture is correct, but the devil is in the detail, and it's in the detail that each one of us has to work out the best way for him- or herself to live!" (CL P-I, 20.12.12). In this predicament new questions eventually arise about how to find ways of living with uncertainty rather than just seeking new answers.

Figure 5.4: Bridget McKenzie, Untitled. 2012.

---

[3] 'Collapsonomics' is defined as "[t]he study of economic and state systems at the edge of their normal social and economic function, including preventative measures to avoid destructive feedback loops and vicious cycles", see http://collapsonomics.org/.

5.4   Between stories

GQ: How are new stories integrated into the lifeworld within the narrative framing of 'uncivilising' and how do they affect personal identities?

As a collection of individuals who engage in inquiries about ways of seeing and understanding contemporary social-ecological crises which lie outside the dominant meta-narrative, the Dark Mountain Project is home to a wide range of stories about soul-searching, journeying and re-envisioning social life. Many of the events, performances and journal writings thematise conditions of uncertainty, confusion and the loss or search for meaning whether in personal processes of sense-making (such as McCann and Jensen DM1, Lewis DM2, Smith DM2, Lewis DM3, Henderson DM3) or in endeavours to re-frame history or establish a collective cosmology (see e.g. Fairlie DM1, Griffiths DM1, Draper DM2, Rao DM2, Hester DM3). The notion of being 'in between stories' was a recurring topic in my conversations and readings, describing a state where there is no fully formed narrative to explain personal or collective developments. This wider context of indeterminacy and 'in-betweenness' frames many of the questions that participants explore within the conversations curated by the Dark Mountain Project.

A corollary of Kingsnorth and Hine's suggestion that the lifeworld is assembled, or weaved, through stories is that a lack of reliable or credible stories brings a degree of disorder and chaos into the lifeworld. This can be seen as a leitmotif in both the method and output of uncivilised art and writing: while civilisation's intrinsic stories are 'crumbling' there are no other current narratives "which we are yet prepared to believe in" (Kingsnorth and Hine DM2, p. 2). Importantly, the search for *new* stories, is not just a search for a new meta-narrative that can explain or give meaning to this state of affairs because, as Sharon Blackie explains,"[m]eta-narratives are not usually told outright, but are reinforced by other more specific narratives told within the culture" (SB P-I, 27.12.12). This points to a critical feature of the Dark Mountain Project's ambition to find and create uncivilised stories: while the meta-narrative of civilisation can be analysed and challenged, it cannot be wilfully changed because it is of a higher order – it is a story about a story. Instead, Blackie describes the process of 'bottom-up' change in structuring social narratives as occurring within a 'web of myths and stories' which connect stories of personal transformation: "we don't change the meta-narrative by sitting around thinking up new stories. We do it by getting out there. By not only seeing in new ways, but *living* in new ways. By being the subjects for those stories. More than that – by being the stories" (ibid.). The search for stories is in this way also a search for a way of living without an orderly, structuring meta-narrative and finding new ways of approaching the uncertainties that arise from this condition.

The dissolution of particular narratives implies a period of not knowing or being without reason, a threshold state where clarity and meaning are absent and given identities and social positions are momentarily suspended. The notion of threshold or 'liminal' states, are a central feature of Dark Mountain talks, events and conversations (see e.g. Du Cann

03.09.13). Anthropologists describe liminal states as "characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (Horvath *et al.*, 2009, p. 3). A degree of liminality is inherent to transitory situations or events where participants stand at a threshold between worldviews (Szakolczai, 2009). It is a state where social structures are temporarily interrupted and from which new relationships can emerge (Turner, 1974). Being 'between stories' as a conception of a situation or time where established ideas and identities give way to new relations and ways of seeing is implicit in many of the writings, conversations and performances inspired by the Dark Mountain Project. In 'On this Site of Loss', Hannah Lewis describes this as a personal sense of displacement:

> Incongruity and contradiction between the various narratives by which I'd explained and justified things reached an extreme where they suddenly annihilated each other: the tottering edifice of stories collapsed, leaving a kind of inner Ground Zero (Lewis DM3, p. 121).

This experience followed from various challenges to Lewis' identity and ways of thinking which led to the disintegration of her normal framework of interpretation and sense-making. The essay's description of moving into and through a psychological 'Ground Zero' to a new sense of convergence in meaning is a direct parallel to the notion of liminality as a process of "opening up new fields of enquiry and spaces of imagination" (Thomassen, 2009, p. 5).

Liminal spaces and states are a central focus and motivation for the *Mearcstapa* collective[4], a group that evolved around a performance-installation at the second Uncivilisation festival. *Mearcstapan* actively engage with the idea of being in a state of dissolution and inquiry. Creating otherworldly settings in and around the festivals, the troupe's mythical and chimerical characters have enacted rituals and performances which invite onlookers to become participants in the liminal world *Mearcstapa* inhabits (see Figure 5.5). These encounters are often both intriguing and unsettling. Dougie Strang, founding member of *Mearcstapa*, describes how the motivation for performances is creating an experience which is:

> ... playful but it's dark as well [...] Being unsettled can put you in such a strange space and when you come back out, your perception might just have shifted a bit. I'm very wary of making any great claims about what art can do so I'm not going to say too much about that. It just is. It just will be, and people will respond. But it feels important to be doing something that has an edge to it (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

Strang explains that as an artistic expression *Mearcstapa* aspires to create a magic which is 'just caught out of the corner of the eye' and subverts ordinary assumptions and ways of seeing. Providing a space where people can be unsettled and have an encounter with

---

[4]Mearcstapa is an Old English word meaning 'border-walker' or 'boundary-treader'.

the liminal, *Mearcstapa* creates a temporary other-world, a place where participants can enter a realm beyond normality if they are willing[5]. *Mearcstapa* member Daniela Othieno describes it in these terms:

> We have a goal – to provide a space for experiences outside the current norms of seeing, acting, understanding and maybe that way to effect change in some way. But we only invite – who takes up the invitation and what they do with it is outside our control. Mearcstapa takes the long view of time – if there are outcomes for people who have experienced something we did, they may not be clear immediately, they may pop up after time, may never be directly attributable to us, and in any case, we will likely never know (Othieno 30.05.13, na.).

Imparting a sense of the liminal also means that *Mearcstapa* members themselves have to embrace the happening as transformative by "receiving the weight of [the audience's] expectations, the impatience, the questioning faces, the unease (theirs and our own), the disorientation, the urge to take control, the urge to run away" (ibid., na.).

Figure 5.5: *Mearstapan* at *Uncivilisation* **2012. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.**

As an embodiment of an underlying attitude or approach to uncertainty which runs through much of the Dark Mountain Project, the boundary-walkers of the *Mearcstapa* collective value the liminal as a space where known ways of seeing and being can expand (see Figure 5.6 for an artistic expression). Although transformation is in no way given – it is of course possible to revert back to and reinforce old ways of seeing when confronted

---

[5]Victor Turner (1974) refers to such experiences as 'liminoid' denoting that they are optional and do not necessarily involve personal transformation.

with uncertainty – the potential arises. An evident, but consequential, point is that *how* one approaches encounters with liminality matters – there is plenty of room for things to go nowhere or even go wrong. But as Hannah Lewis observes about experiencing her 'inner Ground Zero', such experiences can also give rise to moments of insight which culminate in a new sense of meaning:

> Another sudden insight shook me with the peculiar impact of a thought that reclassifies all other thoughts – the realisation that *ideas evolve.* Until then, I had thought that ideas might be true or not true, or more or less true, in relation to a more or less static world. Suddenly it was clear to me that ideas and stories developed in relation to *each other*, to the whole surrounding ecology of ideas, practices, and interpretations of experience, which might propagate, mutate, conflict with or override one another (Lewis DM3, p. 121).

Such experiences or moments of insight are not something that can be planned or controlled. And in an extended period of being between stories – characterised by uncertainty, contradiction and loss of meaning – new understandings often settle gradually rather than instantaneously. But the state of unknowing, however it is experienced, is a crucial stage in finding new stories and meaning: it is necessary for finding something which is by nature outside of existing frames of reference or understanding. As Sharon Blackie writes, the new story "both consolidates and moves beyond everything that we now know" (SB P-I, 27.12.12). This poses questions about the extent to which it is possible to find new, uncivilised stories from within the conceptual framing of incumbent ways of speaking about social-ecological crises.

Figure 5.6: Midnight ceremony at *Uncivilisation* 2013. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

5.5   Reworking the frames of reference

GQ: How can new ways of seeing and speaking emerge without being enclosed by those conceptual frames and webs of metaphors they seek to undermine?

The sense that 'our words and Reality no longer meet', as Rob Lewis formulated it in the previous chapter, is a primary motivation for many of the essays, articles, poems, short stories and illustrations that feature in the Dark Mountain books. In this way, the journal itself can be seen as an exploration of the ways in which the language and concepts of narratives of progress frame ways of seeing, speaking and understanding the world. This is an exploration which involves "facing up to a cultural sphere where all your linguistic, social and imaginative preconceptions are challenged" (Bek DM2, p. 204) as the blogger Wilfried Hou Je Bek[6] describes it. There are different aspects to this challenge which centre on the way that contemporary ideas and values express particular beliefs about the nature of reality and shape associated self-understandings and relationships. But if the framings, conceptions and relations inherent to the cultural narrative of progress are flawed, how can they be reworked? Broadly, the Dark Mountain Project engages with this problematic in three main ways: by challenging dualistic thinking which frames issues in terms of binary opposites (cf. section 4.7), by exploring alternative worldviews and modes of sociality based on animism and ecocentrism (cf. sections 4.3 and 4.7), and by experimenting with new forms of expression and doing in writing, art and creative practices (see section 5.6).

Through engaging with the wider 'ecology of ideas' – as Hannah Lewis calls it above – which establishes the meaning and content of particular concepts, it is possible to gauge how ways of thinking frame individual ways of seeing. In section 4.7, this was exemplified by the way the civilised-primitive framework divides the lifeworld along two oppositional thought and value systems. In conversation with Sajay Samuel, Dougald Hine describes this framework as a 'hidden consensus' which characterises most current debates about the public good:

> It's still very common to speak as if the space of politics is mapped out by the state at one end and the market at the other end, and what we're doing is sliding a rule somewhere between the two. And in terms of how we respond to ecological crisis, to look at how far down we can slide from the dirty tech into the clean tech. And in both cases, this is a way of framing things which misses out – and makes it almost impossible to see, from the perspective which these frames create – a whole world of people's lived experience and how people have made life work, and continue to do so (Hine and Samuel DM3, p. 96).

---

[6]Shut Your Mouth or, literally, Hold Your Beak.

A similar framing can be observed in many other areas of public debate including nature-culture, human-animal, future-past, progressive-traditional, growth-stagnation, and public-private. This framing effectively divides the totality of lived experience into separate domains (cf. chapter 2). Samuel and Hine's deeper point is that ignoring how the categories of this dualistic framing relate to lived reality produces a disembodied way of thinking which 'speaks from nowhere' and conflicts with practical and place-based ways of knowing. This is a theme which is present throughout the different issues of the journal and place, belonging and knowing are central topics of inquiry in many Dark Mountain talks, events and conversations (see also section 6.1).

The contention is that blindness to what lies outside the polarity of the hidden consensus and the privileging of disembodied forms of knowledge structure individual and collective lifeworlds in terms of a subject-object dichotomy which frames the world as an objective reality in which subjective experiences take place (note the similarity with Ingold's notion of the 'double disengagement', cf. Chapter 2). Within this framework, speech about the world which aims for objectivity easily devalues lived experience as less 'real' than abstract reasoning. This is the fundamental premise which the Dark Mountain Project, viewed as a philosophical project, criticises and abandons. The 'voice from nowhere' – analogous to Shapin's (1998) 'view from nowhere' – can be seen in connection with the wider historical process of 'disenchantment' first described by Max Weber (1946), who describes it as a belief system where "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather [...] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (p. 139). Disenchantment thus denotes an increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation during modernity and it has been used in parallel with the notions of Logos and Mythos within the Dark Mountain Project (cf. Kingsnorth 22.03.12, Hine 12.02.12, NH A-R, 20.08.11, SB A-R, 20.08.11). In the essay 'Following Nature's Course', Andrew Taggart describes how disenchantment lies at the heart of the worldview of civilisation which provides explanations and justifications by beginning from the high level of generality and abstraction:

> From a distance, we *inspect* objects, breaking them up into analysable parts. We speak of objects as *having* discernible properties (recall Locke's primary qualities). We regard morality as being law-like and as applying *without exception*. We think of humans as *deliberative* beings from the first, always on the verge of acting rightly or wrongly. We *apply* principles and laws to cases (e.g. bioethics, foreign policy). We accuse each other of hypocrisy (that is, of acting contrary to our stated principles). We think of God, if we do at all, as an *abstract* entity. We speak to each other in terms of valid and sound arguments. We offer defences of our firmly held positions. We conceive of material reality in terms of its abstract *uses*, its resources, its utility, its market value (Taggart DM3, p. 195).

In a disenchanted world 'nature' is conceived as essentially other and relating to the environment in this way produces a world which appears to consist of 'natural resources',

where humans are set apart and eligible – through their intellectual prowess – to exploit these resources to their advantage.

It is in this light the Dark Mountain Project can be seen as a break with mainstream environmentalism and the historical project of sustainability: the idea of balancing human needs and environmental limits is already framed as a problem which can be solved by 'sliding a rule' between consumptive societies on one hand and ecological resources on the other. This framework privileges ways of thinking and living which take for granted that there is intrinsically a friction between human society and ecological health. The critique of environmentalism that the Dark Mountain Project proffers in various guises is that a coherent or sound approach to sustainability has to move outside the 'hidden consensus' which presents identifiable constraints on the imagination by framing humans as 'users' and nature as 'resources' (see e.g. Kingsnorth DM1). And the broader significance of the framing of sustainability as progress is that it becomes difficult to imagine society as anything other than an extension of the present: solutions to the sustainability challenge tend to focus narrowly on 'improving' existing systems of provision and ways of living by optimisation and efficiency measures. The unintended consequences of technological 'fixes' to achieve sustainability illustrate this sentiment (Klein DM2, Kingsnorth DM3).

Uncivilisation contends that the solutions that are negotiated within the framing of the 'hidden consensus' will continue to produce future problems because they "perpetuate the attitude which has brought us here" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 14). Further, because solutions which are conceived in this framing usually enact this fundamental dichotomy in the process of problem-solving, the suppositions inherent to a particular narrative framing can eventually *produce* the realities they are supposed to reflect[7]. This can be seen as equivalent to Larson's (2011) notion of the naturalisation of metaphors: as the concepts implied by the framing of a user-resource relationship are socially performed and accepted, they gradually obtain status as 'normal' or 'objectively real' and become increasingly unquestionable (cf. Chapter 2). It is the naturalisation of concepts that imply a fundamental divide between human society and the natural world which is the fundamental target of *Uncivilisation's* ambition to 'unhumanise' the web of metaphors and concepts which constitute the civilised worldview. To 'uncentre the mind' entails a rejection of an anthropocentric vocabulary and a trialling of other metaphors, concepts, plots and ways of speaking. It is a claim that technical, abstract and abstruse language alone is not sufficient to address the nature of the sustainability challenge. As Rob Lewis observes, a language

> ... set up to handle data and computer models, [cannot handle] moral dilemmas and cultural inertia. It speaks technically when we need to speak plainly. It orientates itself around facts when we need to orientate ourselves around feelings. It elucidates data when we need to elucidate meaning. And it altogether ignores the sacred, which we can no longer afford to do (Lewis DM2, p. 225).

---

[7]As Sajay Samuel shows elsewhere (Samuel and Robert, 2010) neo-classical economic accounts produce scarcity by embedding certain assumptions about human needs into its theoretical framework: they both legitimise and propagate limitless acquisitiveness and profess to solve the associated problems.

Instead, uncivilising implies a radically different framing of the lifeworld, one which acknowledges both the function and limits of language in designating meaning (ibid.). In David Abram's articulation, it involves:

> a reconceiving and a re-seeing and sensing of this wild-flowering world as something
> that cannot ever be fully objectified, a zone of unfoldings that can never be understood
> within a purely quantitative or measurable frame (Hine and Abram DM2, p. 64).

The 'search for new stories' is in this way also a search for ways of speaking and writing that establish a ground for the imagination that makes it possible to manifest realities which move beyond disenchanted points of view (see Figure 5.7 for an artistic expression).

Figure 5.7: Kim Major-George, 'Going with the flow'. Hand pulled collagraph print embellished with gold leaf, 2012.

5.6   Embodying change in creative practice

GQ: How are alternative conceptions of reality enacted?

This raises questions about the ways in which new forms of environment-making can be embodied in practice without unintentionally reproducing the rules and visions of the user-resource perspective. In the course of the research, I began to sense that if the intellectual work on shifting the frames of reference is to avoid becoming a 'doubly disengaged' activity which further divides the lifeworld along binaries, it needs to be engaged from an attitude which, as far as possible, complements critique and deconstruction with the kind of disciplined work Sharon Blackie describes is needed for understanding the transformative power of stories (see e.g TD P-I, 25.10.12). Mountaineers invariably speak of this as a process requiring sustained effort, discipline and deliberately circumventing engrained habits which can be both frustrating and unsettling. A recurring theme in my interview-conversations was the importance of developing and sustaining a personal practice (broadly conceived as practicing creative or reflective skills) which can support and structure this effort. This is also relevant in building shared spaces where trust and compassion is imperative for enabling experimentation and learning new forms of conversation and interaction: "[i]t's worth emphasising 'practice' because most of us aren't automatically good at these things, so it is very much about practicing and learning to do them better" (CL P-I, 20.12.12), as Cat Lupton reflected. In the gradual development of the Dark Mountain Project into a more or less coherent collection of individuals who are experimenting with various forms of creative expression, the different forms of practice have come to include writing, painting, photography, crafts, storytelling, performance-installations, game-playing, music, body practices, dialogue, permaculture, theatre, improvised rituals and contemplative exercises (see e.g. Figures 5.8, 5.9, and 5.10).

This diversity of practices reflect a recognition that the meta-narrative of civilisation is also embedded in physical patterns of perception and ways of doing. Steve Wheeler emphasises the role of the somatic as a necessary and complementary aspect to uncivilising viewed as an analytical process of reworking the narrative framing of progress:

> I think one of the answers to that question, "where next?", is that it isn't just conversation. I mean, so many of these things that we are talking about are ways of reversing alienation. So yes, it's a shift from Logos to Mythos, but it is also a shift away from intellectualisation, verbalisation in general, to feeling and to the physical. So, you see people doing... there's people doing crafts just over there, they are weaving things out of New Zealand flax. It's really valuable to experience something like this and actually come out and connect with nature and connect with crafts and working with your hands. I think it is all part of the same thing. When you start making those connections, it starts awakening something in you (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

A central feature of the Uncivilisation festivals has been a diversity of workshops and skill shares – from 'fieldsensing' and scything to Qi Gong and foraging – which focus

on physical practice as a way of connecting the mind, body and the surrounding environment. This can be seen as a direct expression of Blackie's notion of 'being the stories', as embodying a different kind of world. The role of art and creativity in imagining and inhabiting different stories is central to many mountaineers. Dougie Strang says of this:

> ... we live in a culture that has dismissed those connected ways of being. I'm thinking of the rites and rituals that help to define traditional cultures, and which have at their heart the idea of liminality, a stepping into sacred space or time. Maybe now, in a secular culture, this has become art's role: where it can invite us to step out of ourselves, or it creates a space within which our worldview can be shifted, even just for a moment (DS P-I, 27.02.13).

In opening up a space for imagining a different kind of reality, art and creative practice can support both envisioning and enacting new worldviews.
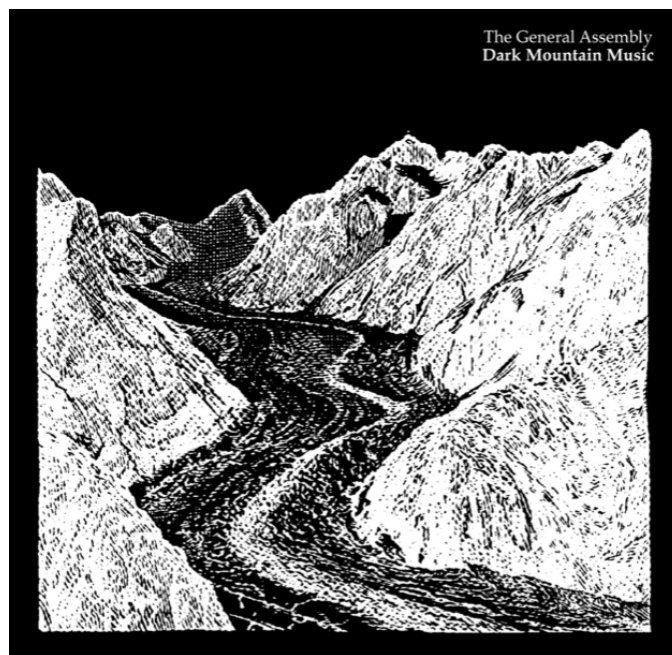
Figure 5.8: The General Assembly, 'Dark Mountain Music' album cover. See http://thegeneralassembly.bandcamp.com/album/dark-mountain-music.

Hence, as a practice which directly engages the imagination, art is a way to examine ways of seeing which lie outside the normality of everyday life. Mario Petrucci writes about this in his essay 'Three hot drops of salmon oil':

> Art can catalyse the imaginative leaps required to engage with time and space on a scale beyond our usual ken, helping to balance that tendency for the low-risk localised 'now' to dominate. Art also exercises the imaginative faculties, which are essential to a full appreciation of facts: imagination is crucial when contesting or challenging any accepted interpretation of data, just as it is to those who seek to disguise the facts or skew the analysis (Petrucci DM1, p. 141).

This perspetive engages directly with McGilchrist's insight that the imagination plays a central role in the process of forming personal identities. As Petrucci puts it: "[e]ach object we create, whether fanciful or rooted in cast-iron physical-mathematical precepts, is an extension of our imagination" (ibid., p. 141). It is in the imagination that the meaning of a particular narrative or story falls into place within larger structures or webs of metaphors (cf. Chapter 2) and thus the imagination is key to sense-making: it is where we make sense of what new experiences mean and where our identities are integrated (cf. McGilchrist, 2009). This should also be seen in connection with the view of stories as productive of reality. By imagining what a story is like in lived reality it subsequently becomes possible to enact this within the lifeworld. Tony Dias describes how

> While reading stories we are not trapped in thought, we are. We exist imaginatively within an alternate set of conditions, not stuck within our present conditioning. We leave the finite limitations of what-has-been-conceived. We expand our view (TD P-I, 25.10.12).

In this way, art and stories can activate the imagination which is the faculty that helps us navigate the lifeworld: we *imagine* where we are going, how we might get there and what we need on the way.

Figure 5.9: 'Liminal'. Performance at *Uncivilisation* 2011. Photo by Colin Perrett.

Because art springs from and is grasped through the imagination, it is a medium which provides direct access to other ways of seeing. In creating a poem, a piece of writing, a painting or picture, an artist has to remain open to the ambiguity within what is created in order to let the work emerge and take form. And, if a work of art tells a particular story,

the artist becomes familiar with the people and things that inhabit that story: in storying, we imagine how plots unfold and how people and objects relate (cf. Ingold, 2011). In conversation with David Borthwick at the 2012 Carrying the Fire festival about her eighth novel, *The Gathering Night*, Margaret Elphinstone explained how she had come to imagine the lifeworlds of her characters living in Mesolithic Scotland eight thousand years ago. This involved researching the tools, rituals and language of hunter-gather cultures at that time and imagining how they would have seen the land, related to the animals and thought of life and death. She says of the difficulties for a modern human being to imagine a pre-historic way of life:

> We can't help it. We're post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic, urban. We have a degree
> of self-consciousness about communing with nature. We can't help it because there
> is that dichotomy between our world and the natural world and we have to make
> ourselves cross that barrier (ME A-R, 21.04.12).

How does one begin to relate differently to 'nature' when the very concept which is used to denote what we think of is part of a way of seeing which upholds the separation one is trying to imagine is not there? Understanding what the 'environment' or 'nature' might mean outside the contrasting concept of 'culture' implies abandoning the dualistic logic that underpins nature-as-environment and culture-as-human (cf. section 5.5). Elphinstone describes this as "trying to think back to a mindset where individual separation from community and nature is not perceived in quite the same way as today" (ibid.).

Figure 5.10: Dougie Strang, 'Roe deer'. Part of the installation 'Charnel house for road kill', *Uncivilisation* **2013.**

In many of the conversations, events and activities I took part in, there was a clear sense that engaging in an artistic practice is a means of changing worldview by inhabiting

a different mindset in the imagination, seeing the lifeworld differently and experimenting with new metaphors and imagery which can hold this experience. Through exploring and practicing such different consciousness in the imagination it is possible to begin to embody that different way of relating to the surrounding world and articulate what it is like. But this embodiment takes place slowly and without any act of will: it is like the metaphor of 'a snake shedding its skin' that Tony Dias offers as a description for this kind of transformation (cf. section 4.7). It is not possible to change one's way of seeing by sheer determination because it involves *inhabiting* the world differently, not just *acting* differently. Reason can help identify those concepts and ways of thinking that delimit the imagination but experiencing the meaning of those limits is a practice of probing into what the world might be like without them. That is as far as directed thought can take us because the change itself occurs outside of thought: it is the sensing, experiencing, perceiving body which registers differently. When a change can be observed, all of one's relationships are seen from a different view – as epitomised by Hannah Lewis' experience of 'a thought that reclassifies all other thoughts' (cf. section 5.4). This cannot be planned, controlled or willed. It is much like Rima Staines' description of painting as an alembic process where transformation happens both within the artist and within the artwork. She writes about the painting 'The Alchemist': "it looks nothing like I imagined it would when I thought it up [...] it has painted me, and I almost don't know how it happened" (Staines DM3, na.) – see Figure 5.11.

This experience of a poem, a song or a painting 'creating itself' is familiar to most people who engage in creative lines of work. As a way of knowing it is radically different from the discursive, deductive and abstract mode of Logos: where the effectiveness of facts and reasoned discourse ends, it is possible to arrive at new understandings through intuition, empathy, creativity and imagination. McGilchrist (2009) describes this as *mimesis*, the ability to inhabit experiences beyond our own history, which makes it possible to

> "escape from the confines of our own experience and enter directly into the experience of another being: this is the way in which, through human consciousness we bridge the gap, share in what another feels and does, in what it is like to be that person. This comes through our ability to transform what we perceive into something we directly experience" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 248).

This insight is directly connected with the ambition in the Dark Mountain Project to shift from Logos-centric ways of knowing to engaging with the deeper roots of mythopoetic reality. It explains the meaning of Mythos as a complementary mode of knowing: in creative practice an idea is received in the imagination and expresses itself materially in the activities of imagining and doing. Ideas can be expressed as themes in the work but holding or pursuing a predefined thought too vigorously can also inhibit creativity itself. Unable to control the final 'output' an artist has to remain open to the transformation that takes place within the work. However, the recognition that facts, discourse and analysis can only take one so far in understanding a new way of seeing is not a dismissal of Logos as a way of knowing or the boundaries it draws within the lifeworld. As McGilchrist shows, the

apparent dichotomy between different modes of knowing and attending to the lifeworld is not one of opposition but of affinity. The holistic mode of attention embodied by the right brain hemisphere encompasses what the left brain hemisphere dissects: "it is simply another reverberative process, in which something comes into being – as all life does – through the union of separated forces, retaining their separation but within that union, one entity acting with another" so that "what would look to the left hemisphere like the individual's identity being *lost* in the group becomes merely its being taken up (*aufgehoben*) within the group where it belongs" (ibid., p. 256). And hence, Mythos pervades Logos, so that Logos without Mythos is impossible: by shifting view from dualism-as-opposition to dualism-as-relation it is possible to embrace either aspect without having to commit to one as superior. And in this way, a possibility is opened for re-storying the lifeworld without the onto-epistemological assumptions of the civilised worldview which sees in terms of an underlying opposition between self and other, nature and culture, humans and more-than-human natures.

Figure 5.11: Rima Staines, 'The Alchemist'. Watercolour and gold wax, 2012.

5.7   Re-storying: the narrator of the lifeworld as poet

GQ: How does active re-narration of the lifeworld enable the 'constellation of an alternate reality'?

This chapter has described the process of questioning and re-imagining the conceptual framings which characterise the meta-narrative of progress and illustrated how participants in the Dark Mountain Project engage with the process of embodying change in creative practices. While this is a personal process which is unique to each participant, there are also broader parallels both between the conditions for engaging with this inquiry and how it unfolds. First of all, it is crucial that there is an openness towards the underlying sentiment that there is something defective about progress as a 'myth' or meta-narrative. But there also has to be a willingness to engage in a mode of inquiry which is not always easy and sometimes disorientating. At this point there is a potential for people to turn away from the inquiry. Engaging with the idea of uncivilisation as a process of challenging progress involves a degree of acceptance of a perspective where the future is not by definition an improved version of the present. It is also a confrontation with the deeper rules, norms and habits that structure one's own way of seeing. For many mountaineers, including myself, this is an unsettling experience because it introduces a far-reaching uncertainty into the lifeworld and it means giving up hope that many of the deep afflictions and injustices that have happened during the age of industrial civilisation can be undone. This shift in perspective may seem cynical or despairing but – while this may at times be the case – it also represents a more profound change in attitude: rather than being problems to be *solved*, they are wounds to be *healed*, which implies a different process, namely grieving and reckoning (see e.g. REM, 15.02.12). In my own experience, inquiring into the meaning of 'uncivilising' has been inseparable from coming to a greater understanding of the extent to which my personal lifeworld is entangled with and affected by a history of colonisation[8]. The most appropriate description I have encountered of this shift in attitude is Derek Rasmussen's (2002) formulation of a pedagogy for the oppressor: "It seems to me that if our way of life is causing most of the problems that the rest of the world has to deal with, the best thing we can do is *deal with our own way of life*" (p. 86, original emphasis). In this view, contesting and expanding the conceptual framing of what kind of life is possible and desirable is the first step in creating ways of living that do not reproduce the antagonisms of progress.

As described in the foregoing sections, it is possible to begin enacting new modes of seeing and being through imagination and creative practice. This can be described as a process where mimesis turns from imitation and *being like* to embodiment and *becoming* (cf. McGilchrist, 2009). By inhabiting alternative ways of thinking and doing in the imagination these perspectives can gain authenticity and meaning when they become relevant to and embodied in personal lifeworlds. Mountaineers describe this process in varying

---

[8]See e.g. my sister, Naja's, study of being mixed-race (Graugaard, 2013) and her work on the cultural and political relations between Denmark and Greenland (Graugaard, 2009).

ways which often depend on what kind of personal practice is involved. In my own experience as a researcher, the shared inquiries, conversations and reflections about aspects of personal transformation were key. Through my recurring dialogues with Tony Dias, I discovered the significance of McGilchrist's observation about how attention shapes the lifeworld. I found that my tendency to impose my own intention on a conversation affected the outcome in a very tangible way and it became my practice to ease out of this habit (O-D, 14.09.12). Through his work as a painter, writer and designer, Dias had come to see the importance of not getting stuck in preconceptions and critique:

> ... this talk about putting energy into explaining what's wrong with whatever is out there now becomes self-defeating pretty quickly. It is an attention hog. It holds our gaze on a mirror where we are looking at them. It does not help us focus on what we *can* do. For each of us, what we can do starts with how we focus our attention. How we untangle our attention from this mess. How we use our attention to re-integrate our selves (TD P-I, 11.12.12).

In light of work like McGilchrist's on cognition, this is a key insight into the process of change in onto-epistemologies. Alan Wallace, scholar on cognition, perception and attention, writes:

> "Our faculty of attention affects us in countless ways. Our very perception of reality is tied closely to where we focus our attention. Only what we pay attention to seems real to us, whereas whatever we ignore – no matter how important it may be – seems to fade into insignificance" (2006, p. 2).

When a creative practice allows for refining attention and awareness it can support the process of enacting and embodying new life narratives. Through stories it is possible to access unaccustomed perspectives and exist imaginatively. Stories also dramatise some of the conflicts that arise during personal transformation and help make sense of the process; there is a sense in which it is in stories that new ways of seeing and doing are weaved into the lifeworld.

I came to see this weaving, or narration, of stories into individual lifeworlds as a creative process where the narrator becomes a *poet* – a word which derives its meaning from *maker* – in the sense of actively seeking new meanings within a personal life story. By engaging with the mythopoetic nature of stories, new characters, perspectives, and plots are weaved into the lifeworld by the narrator as poet. This is, however, not a process commanded by reason and it can be psychologically demanding: in those instances where a different way of seeing challenges something which is a source of someone's personal identity, changing view can be difficult – if it is not actively resisted – because the other way of seeing is perceived as threatening to the stability of one's own personhood or broader role in the structures of social life (cf. Peavy, 1997, 2004). This highlights the paradoxical nature of changes in worldview. The person who wants to change cannot do so *alone* because the change lies partly in a destruction or re-drawing of the boundaries

of the self and its relations. Something else is required beyond *wanting* change: an openness towards letting one's own sense of self be infused by the otherness inherent in one's relations with the world (see e.g. O-D, 06.12.12). Therefore a degree of resistance to the immediate impulse to make sense in terms of one's preconceptions is necessary for new aspects of self-other relationships to develop outside deeper, acculturated ways of seeing. To remain open in the breakdown of meaning that follows *not* making sense in terms of one's preconceptions, it is necessary to trust the otherness of one's relations, to be prepared that they may be saying something although it cannot be immediately heard or understood. Openness and trust were key themes in my interview-conversations about this kind of change: it involves "a letting go of certainty and being open to risk and the fact that you may have to adapt and be more flexible" (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

The web of metaphors conjured by modern narratives of progress frame contemporary society as the outcome of social interactions where the combined actions of 'individuals', who 'compete' over 'scarce resources' in a struggle for 'survival' (or just out of plain 'self-interest'), benefit 'society' through the 'self-regulation' of 'markets'. Through metaphoric resonance with other figures of speech which correlate and substantiate each other this account is motivated as an explanation of economic rationality – the 'free market', the 'invisible hand' and 'growth' are all part of the same vocabulary which describes the neoliberal economy (cf. Larson, 2011). As Naomi Klein points out in her essay 'On precaution' the deeper narrative and assumptions inherent to this worldview revolve around an idea of nature as an 'inexhaustible frontier' – they only make sense in a world of availability and access to infinite resources:

> It is only this underlying assumption of limitlessness that makes it possible to take the reckless risks that we do. Because this is our real master narrative: However much we mess up, there will always be more: more water, more land, more untapped resources. A new bubble will replace the old one, a new technology will fix the mess we made with the last one (Klein DM2, p. 23).

As soon as we speak of nature as 'resources' and social life in terms of 'competition', the conversation is framed by webs of metaphors which imply a setting where individuals vie to satisfy their self-interest within a background environment of 'natural assets' or 'raw materials'. Unless these metaphors are challenged the imagination becomes limited by their implications.

Becoming an active narrator of the lifeworld can be seen as a 'de-naturalising' of such dominant metaphors. As "our ideas about the world, including our values, are built on much deeper conceptions concerning the nature of reality and of knowledge" which "in turn shape the conception of the self from which we act" (Hamilton, 2009, na.), we can say that re-narrating those webs of metaphors which support a view of the natural world as consisting of (limitless) resources is also an act of envisioning alternative relations within more-than-human nature and initiating new forms of environment-making. And as a community of inquiry which is both questioning the cultural narratives that structure life within civilisation and experimenting with new ways of storying the lifeworld, the

Dark Mountain Project curates conversations which can support and enable such personal reorientation of guiding social narratives. The journals feature a number of essays which deliberately subvert and contest particular metaphors, concepts and histories which have been naturalised – or mythologised as Warren Draper puts it in his revisionist account of the Luddite uprising (Draper DM2) – in the worldview of civilisation. This can be seen as an experimentation with framings that describe and elicit social interactions away from the dualistic language of progress towards a relational and connecting language which sees humans as a 'strand of a web' (Kingsnorth and Hine MA).

Re-storying the lifeworld implies becoming a poet of one's own lived reality and finding the appropriate roles, concepts, metaphors and plots with which to narrate a way of life that is not bounded by the binary framing of progress. The claim of the Dark Mountain Project is that this reframing is the best way to approach a future which is radically uncertain but profoundly precarious. This position holds that what kind of future we face depends on this re-storying, as Dougald Hine suggests in conversation with Vinay Gupta:

> ... if we frame the question of sustainability as – how do we achieve the most energy-intensive society we can, within ecological limits – the result is the end of democracy. There is no political choice left about our way of living. Whereas, if we include the range of positions below those limits, we have many possible ways of living (Hine and Gupta DM1, p. 44).

In this way, opening up aspects of reality that lie outside the narrative and metaphors of progress is a way of practicing and enacting ways of living which are viable in a future 'topography of collapse' where material wealth is subsiding. And that poses further questions about how to approach the transformation and establishment of institutions and modes of organisation which support radically different ways of relating to each other, the natural world and the future.

Chapter summary: In this chapter, I have described the wider significance of the Dark Mountain narrative for understanding the future as a 'topography of collapse' as well as the way this positions the individual 'narrator as poet'. Understood both as a personal reality and a wider historical framing, 'collapse' undermines the conceptual and discursive framework of the meta-narrative of progress. Rather than replacing the belief in progress with other predictions of the future, the 'topography of collapse' can be seen as an acceptance that the future is radically uncertain. At the personal level, the dissolution of narratives of progress implies a foundering of established concepts and a phase of indeterminacy and 'liminality' where participants often find themselves in a space without an orderly or structured life narrative. By reworking personal narrative framings and engaging in different forms of creative practice, mountaineers begin to imagine and embody other ways of seeing. In this process of questioning and 'uncivilising', new understandings and relationships emerge which express qualitatively different ways of thinking and being to those implied by the disenchanted view of progress. This can be seen as an act

of re-storying lived reality by finding new roles, metaphors and plots that can guide a way of living outside the dichotomies presented by the meta-narrative of progress.

This underlines the role of stories in enabling new practices and forms of interaction, and through examining their characteristics – their imagery, casts and plots – it is possible to know more about the social relationships they imply. The relation between narratives and forms of knowledge has also been examined further and this chapter suggests that the deeper conceptual and linguistic framework which distinguishes a particular cultural narrative is reflected in the kind of knowledges and actions it makes available. By virtue of its binary framing, the 'hidden consensus' of the meta-narrative of progress can be seen to devalue those knowledges and actions which it deems at the negative end of this polarity. In this way, knowledges and actions that centre on the past are treated as inferior as a result of being 'traditional', 'romantic', 'primitive' or 'uncivilised'. A transformation in a guiding life narrative away from such dichotomies opens up for new ways of seeing and doing which were previously inaccessible. This can be seen as a re-positioning of the individual narrator of the lifeworld. By becoming aware of the processes by which narrative positioning occurs, the 'narrator as poet' can become a co-creator of the personal narratives which structure the lifeworld and thereby begin to inhabit a mode of being which is qualitatively different.

Addressing the foundational assumptions, metaphors and narratives that shape the mindset of progress, inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project construct an alternate – onto-epistemological – frame of reference which allows new meanings and forms of interaction to emerge. This both challenges existing authority structures and develops a vocabulary of 'uncivilising' which introduces new relations and meanings to the lifeworld. Such inquiries can thus be seen as an experimentation with rules and visions of environment-making which present a radically different view of sustainability to the user-resource perspective: the idea of balancing human needs and environmental protection is displaced by a search for a vocabulary which moves beyond quantitative and 'disenchanted' ways of speaking about more-than-human nature. The next chapter continues to consider the assumptions and relations that characterise modes of environment-making within the Dark Mountain Project as well as the social institutions it has given rise to.