

## Chapter 6

# Embodying the future

The wild god reaches into a bag  
Made of moles and nightingale-skin.  
He pulls out a two-reeded pipe,  
Raises an eyebrow  
And all the birds begin to sing.

*Tom Hirons in Dark Mountain, issue 3, p. 125*

In the foregoing chapters I have described the emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a community of inquiry which explores what an ‘uncivilised worldview’ is like, and examined how re-storying the lifeworld occurs as a gradual process of re-imagining and embodying aspects of this worldview through creative practice. This chapter goes on to examine the inherent assumptions and values that characterise the Dark Mountain Project as a cultural intervention, and considers how this affects notions of place, time, agency, social change, innovation and developing new institutions. Dark Mountain’s focus on stories, myth and narrative can be seen as an acknowledgement of David Abram’s (1997) description of the present age as one where meaning has become impoverished through the codification and abstraction of language itself: in this view, ‘disenchanted’ ways of speaking about the world (cf. section 5.5) are an active ‘displacement of sensory participation’ in the surrounding environment which "functions to *eclipse* the enveloping earth from human awareness" (p. 217, original emphasis). This helps to explain the emphasis on the role of Mythos, language and perception in the search for uncivilised stories: the ambition is to practice ways of seeing and speaking which re-enliven the environment by bringing more-than-human perspectives into the lifeworld. It is an approach which involves engaging with and shifting the conceptual and narrative frames of reference which make sense of these perspectives (cf. section 5.5). Making sense of the lifeworld, in Abram’s terms, is "to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one’s felt awareness of the world" (ibid., p. 265). The inquiries into re-storying the lifeworld that take place within different circles of conversation in the Dark Mountain Project can thus be seen as a practice which enables

new relations between the ‘narrator as poet’ and the world in which she moves.

In this chapter, I probe into the significance of this practice with a view to elucidate the deeper connections between narratives, knowledge and action. Building on the inquiry into this relation in the previous chapters, as well as the foregoing observations about the role of stories in enabling new ways of doing, I consider what the lifeworld begins to look like once the narrative framing of progress is questioned and delegitimised. Experimenting with new ways of seeing involves a re-sensing and reconceptualisation of contextual and temporal aspects of personal identities and visions of the future. Hence, the first two sections delve into the deeper onto-epistemological assumptions within the Dark Mountain Project concerning *space* and *time*, while the sections 6.3 and 6.4 explore the underpinning attitudes, skills and ethics that support these ways of seeing the world. Lastly, sections 6.5 and 6.6 then go on to consider the ways in which new modes of interaction and social institutions emerge from this ground. In this way, this chapter directly addresses the question about how sustainability narratives affect the organisation and diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project, and I draw out findings from across the empirical chapters to show how the relations implied by particular ways of seeing and doing affect the emergence of new modes of interaction and organisation within Dark Mountain. Finally, this chapter points to the wider significance of finding ways to interact that do not channel participants’ energy into a programme of action for the emergence of new forms of environment-making.

## 6.1 Re-enchantment and relationship with place

*GQ: What characterises the transformation of individual identities and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project and what kind of relations to the surrounding world do they express?*

Seeing the rules and visions of environment-making conveyed in the imageries, narratives and practices that express and embody particular relations within nature-as-matrix, opens up questions about what kinds of relations the inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project give rise to. In this and the following section I explore the underlying onto-epistemological assumptions regarding *space* and *time* in order to show what kind of world the Dark Mountain narrative situates the ‘narrator as poet’ within. I do this in relation to the overarching theme of *enchantment* and draw on documentary analyses, the interview-conversations and participant observation across the different narrative sites to show how Dark Mountain relates to more-than-human nature as a community of inquiry.

A central image used to describe civilisation as a belief system in the Dark Mountain Project is that of a ‘machine’: “[o]nce the air was a machine, and once the people breathed it” (Thorp and Major-George DM3, na.), and human agency is frequently depicted as ‘cogs’ in this machinery (see e.g. Kingsnorth DM3). The search for uncivilised stories is therefore also an endeavour to rediscover and reconnect with those aspects of the lifeworld which have been suppressed by mechanical, Logos-centric and disenchanting

ways of speaking about the world, to "celebrate writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 19). A clear, if understated, aspiration of *Uncivilisation* is the "affirmation of the wonder of what it means to be truly human" (Kingsnorth and Hine MA, p. 15) and the desire to

accept the world for what it is and to make our home here, rather than dreaming of relocating to the stars, or existing in a Man-forged bubble and pretending to ourselves that there is nothing outside it to which we have any connection at all (ibid., p. 15),

entails a partial surrender to the otherness of 'outside' nature where the 'barrier of self-consciousness' that Elphinstone describes (cf. section 5.6) recedes as the natural world is no longer envisaged as standing in opposition to the individual self. In relation to the historical process of the disenchantment of the Western worldview (cf. section 5.5) this resolve expresses a sentiment that "we have long been exiled from our sensuous natures and also from the wellspring of existence" (Taggart DM3, p. 183). In this way, embodying other ways of seeing, and opening up to Mythos as a way of knowing, can be described as a gradual *re-enchantment*, where meanings and metaphors that have been rendered invalid or unreal by privileging reason as the sole measure of knowledge or criterion of validity (cf. section 4.4) begin to find new expressions in the lifeworld.

The various descriptions of this in the Dark Mountain journals, talks and conversations (e.g. Hughes DM1, Challenger DM1, Morris DM1, Hirons(a) DM3, Thorp and Major-George DM3) often express a sense of speechlessness and a blurring of the distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds: "if we could speak, words / would climb out of our mouths / and dance all over the trees, / the bushes and horses / and revolving earth" (Strang DM2, p. 83). Tony Dias describes this experience as a form of nonverbal communication with the surrounding world:

Throughout evolution what led to this organism and what keeps it functioning, has accumulated something, an intelligence we can learn to trust. The more we trust it, the more we listen to our organism, and the more we relate to it with compassion and respect. The more we do this, the more it speaks to us. The more we and our organisms communicate, the more we converse with all of the other organisms around us (TD P-I, 20.11.12).

This kind of communication is conveyed by Phil Brachi as a "kind of empathic attunement to our ancestors' world of experience" (Brachi DM3, p. 117) which exists in the quiet of the mind:

As most times and cultures have attested, it is here coexisting and awaits our stillness. This beautiful attunement arrives quite naturally; it is easier to enter this state than to describe it (ibid, p. 223).

Brachi observes that this form of communication is accessible through quietude and respectful suspension of apprehension. As such, it can be seen as analogous to the experience in Eastern wisdom traditions of *no-mind*, or *wu-hsin* (see e.g. Watts, 1999), a state

where "the mind becomes silent, the center dissolves, and love does what it will" (Moffatt, 1976, p. 43). Because this state of mind takes place outside of reflexive thought (Bohm, 2004a) it does not lend itself easily to analysis, but it can be described, with Elphinstone's expression, as an experience of *communing with nature* which 'joins together' the apparently separate individual self and its environment (cf. section 5.6).

Communion with more-than-human nature and finding a personal sense of the sacred is, in Doug Tompkins' words, "one way those of us coming from the techno-industrial culture can try to get a grip on the idea that we need to share the planet with other creatures" (Kingsnorth et al. DM3, p. 148). It is a way of reinstating the importance and uniqueness of *place* in cultures of progress which routinely substitute the notion of distinctive place with homogenous space (cf. Escobar, 2001). As "a qualitative matrix, a pulsing or potentized field of experience" (Abram, 1997, p. 190), place is deeply entwined with the physical and biological temporalities of its various elements – a fundamental attribute which the notion of space tends to erase (see also section 6.2). Engaging with place and temporalities through personal and creative practices can thus also be seen as finding new ways to relate to more-than-human nature. In 'Finding Roe Deer', Thomas Keyes conveys how the process of making vellum from road kill deer becomes a practice which connects the author with the animal, the materials and their history (see Figure 6.1):

It is as if the sacrifice of the deer into the human world has set in motion all these activities; a series of rituals are evolving, self-organising through the logic of the materials and the landscape [...] Making vellum is like fire, so deep and comforting it dissolves history. Going through motions and movements and smells and textures that connect thousands of years into the 'distant' past; awakening dormant thoughts that will pass into the future and reemerge whenever deer and people connect (Keyes DM3, p. 60).

Relationship with place through connection with materials, landscape and history is another motif which runs through many of the essays, stories, poems and images in the journals (e.g. Griffiths DM1, Armstrong DM2, Challenger DM2, Wolfbird DM2, Szabo DM3, Alcock DM3, Mckenzie DM3, Hirons(b) DM3) and the craft and skill sharing that takes place at the festivals are direct ways to practice and build a connection with the land.

Finding a renewed sense of place and belonging to the land can be seen as a process of re-awakening a sense of indigeneity (cf. McIntosh, 2012a). Although the word *indigenous* is contested, especially within the context of industrialised, modern societies, it is the term which best describes this deeper sense of relationship and belonging (cf. Williams, 2012). It should thus be understood in terms of Derek Rasmussen's (2013) description that:

*An Indigenous People are those who believe that they belong to a place;  
a Non-Indigenous People are those who believe that places belong to them.*

In this sense, connecting with place is a reclaiming of the land as a source of identity. And this entails, especially in cultures with a colonial past or present, a confrontation with the



**Figure 6.1: Thomas Keyes, 'Roe deer in spring Birch'. Roe deer parchment, birch wood smoke and birch tar smoke, 2014.**

habits, attitudes and views which objectify indigenous ways of living. This is a difficult and nebulous task which requires a re-examination of one's connection with, and personal part in, the history of colonialism, as Jay Griffiths points out in her essay 'This England': "For the English to have back our deep, lovely Englishness, we need to remember our past soberly, and to stop repeating its iniquities today through the devious reach of corporate colonialism" (Griffiths DM1, p. 207). Such re-examination is inherent to many of the writings and talks within the Dark Mountain Project (e.g. Simon Fairlie on the Commons (Fairlie DM1) or Warren Draper on the Luddites (Draper DM2) as mentioned earlier). Once a relationship with place develops and it becomes part of one's identity, it is difficult, if not impossible, to view it merely as 'resource', as Sharon Blackie proposes in my interview with her:

True commitment to place – love for a place – should lead inevitably to ecological stewardship: if you are devoted to a place, and know yourself to be a part of its ecosystem, then you're more likely to protect it – and to fight for it, if necessary. And these days, it's too easy to walk away. If we *genuinely* connect with our places, and *genuinely* connect with our stories, then walking away simply isn't an option. It'd be like walking away from life (SB P-I, 27.12.12).

Such a connection implies getting to know the landscape and ecology of one's immediate surroundings and rediscovering the history and myths of the place one inhabits (see e.g. Figure 6.2 for an artistic expression). In his talk at the Uncivilisation festival in 2012,

‘Gambling with the Knuckle-Bones of Wolves’, storyteller, author and mythologist Martin Shaw described myth as *the power of a place speaking*, as a voice of the land through which its inhabitants speak to the human world (MS A-R, 18.08.12). Hearing this voice is a practice which requires ‘listening at the edge of one’s understanding’ and opening up for new stories and plots to give meaning to the lifeworld.

Re-enchantment can thus be understood as a way of acknowledging the voices of the natural world and to begin learning how to listen to them. The ‘earth-ethic’ (Griffiths DM1) and eco-centric (Kingsnorth et al. DM3) imagery and language of the Dark Mountain Project has been construed as a framing where “[t]he nuances, contradictions, ambivalences and conflicts inherent to society are abolished so that ‘civilization’ becomes a psychical object devoid of differentiation” (Hogget 2011, p. 271) producing a ‘reverse image’ of the enlightenment ideas that gave rise to the modern notion of progress. This frames the experience of uncivilising and re-enchantment as a wilful rejection of its opposite, *disenchantment*. However, in light of the earlier observations about abandoning the framework of dualistic opposites (cf. section 4.7) and Logos and Mythos as complementary rather than oppositional modes of knowing (cf. section 5.6), it is important to avoid seeing enchantment as being in broad opposition to disenchantment, modernity or civilisation. In parallel with McGilchrist’s observations about the relation between the different modes of attention embodied by the two brain hemispheres, Patrick Curry (2012) remarks that enchantment encompasses disenchanted ways of seeing: “in a powerful moment of enchantment, the secular pieties of modernity, such as the radical difference between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, ‘man’ and ‘universe’, ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’, simply vanish” (p. 81). This is similar to the ‘reverberative process’ of integrating individual identity with the wider environment through ‘the union of separated forces’ described in section 5.6. Drawing on Tolkien’s understanding of enchantment as the ‘realisation of imagined wonder’, Curry describes the ontology of enchantment as relational, perspectival and participatory, a way of being which is integral to the health and functioning of human relations: it is a form of communion with more-than-human nature which is ultimately unbidable and cannot be controlled (*ibid.*). In this perspective, enchantment and the sacred should not be seen as an esoteric or transcendent experience but as existing in an awareness or mode of perception and *already* present in those aspects of life which exceed rationalist prescription and preconception.

As a mutual inquiry about place and the role of the sacred in communing with the natural world, the Dark Mountain Project opens up for the possibility of a re-enchantment of the lifeworld. This is reflected in the central role which the notion of *wildness* plays in the writing, performances, art and events of Dark Mountain: as Curry (2012) writes, the experience of wildness – “the quality or attribute of uncontrollability by human will” (p. 79) – is also one of enchantment. Finding a personal practice which enables communion with place is central in the shift towards enchantment and connecting with the more-than-human world beyond conceptions such as ‘resource’ or a background ‘environment’. Key to attuning to the voice of places is engaging with their inherent temporalities rather than imposing an abstract sense of time which overrides naturally embedded cycles of

evolution. And this leads to another of the central aspects of the onto-epistemological assumptions that guide environment-making within the inquiries and practices of the Dark Mountain Project: a reconfiguration and re-experiencing of the linear conception of time inherent to the worldview of progress.



**Figure 6.2:** Tom Hirons, 'Twyford Down'. Chalk on slate. Installation commemorating protest sites against the UK road building programme in the 1990s at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.

## 6.2 Wild time and embodied temporalities

*GQ: How does a transformation away from linear understandings of time shape personal identities and worldviews?*

The reclamation of place as a source of identity and communion with more-than-human nature also underpins the search within Dark Mountain for historical narratives which provide alternative explanations for why particular worldviews, modes of social organisation and technologies have become prevalent (see e.g. Hester DM3). From a historical perspective, the imbalance between Logos and Mythos (cf. section 4.4) is seen as a consequence of gradual "shifts away from the sensuous and the specific, towards the abstract and exchangeable; and one of the axes along which this has taken place is our relationship to time" (Hine and Abram DM2, p. 266). The role of time in structuring both

individual and collective lifeworlds is central to Dark Mountain's critique of the understanding of history as progress and as a continual improvement of the human condition: this view of history implies an 'enslavement of the present to the future' which breaks the immediate perceptual connection to one's surroundings (Hine and Abram DM2) and the view of time as primarily abstract, absolute and homogeneous is thus part and parcel of the disenchantment of the natural world.

To understand the temporal dimension of disenchantment it is worth considering recent studies of the ecology of time (cf. Serres, 1995; Adam *et al.*, 1997; Adam, 1998; Adam and Groves, 2007; Hassan, 2009; Groves, 2010; Svenstrup, 2012; Bastian, 2014) which examine the temporalities of industrial society, modernity and social-ecological crisis. This approach to the history and perception of social and technological time describes the difference between the mechanical time of progress and the cyclical time of ecology as a difference between disembodied and embodied temporalities – which give rise to very different conceptions of the future. Barbara Adam (2010) observes about the dominant understanding of time in modern societies:

"The difference between contextualised and decontextualised futures is significant because embodied futures could not be traded [...] The commodified future, emptied of all contents, in contrast, can be traded, exchanged and discounted without restrictions or limits. Divorced from context, it can be exploited anywhere, at any time and for any circumstance" (p. 366).

This historical account of the co-production of social and technological time describes how the relation between social life and place-specific temporalities has been gradually weakened and supplanted by the disembodied temporalities of modern forms of organisation. The pursuit of progress – and with it the pursuit of growth – has in effect erased embodied and contextualised temporalities in favour of a vision of the future which is 'empty' and therefore open to be enrolled and manipulated for present gain. Because the decontextualised future of progress is "[d]evoid of content and meaning" it is not contingent on the past but "a realm destined to be filled with our desire, to be formed and occupied according to rational blueprints, holding out the promise that it can be what we want it to be" (*ibid.*, p. 366).

The view of the future as 'empty', and of time more broadly as abstract and disembodied, is a main target of *Uncivilisation's* critique of progress: this is the belief that underpins the attitude that, historically speaking, 'actions do not have consequences' and that history itself is 'an escalator leading to human perfection' (Kingsnorth and Hine MA). The tendency to project future hopes, desires, plans and aspirations onto the present, and to disregard temporalities which do not match those projections, is seen as essentially ideological. And this points to the central perception in this line of critique: unquestioned belief in progress as a meta-narrative is based in *faith* in its basic tenets much like institutionalised religions. Drawing on Bellah's (1967) concept of civil religion<sup>1</sup>, which

<sup>1</sup>Robert Bellah developed the notion of civil religion from Rousseau's use of the term in *The Social Contract* and it subsequently gained importance as a sociological concept that examines the sacrosanct nature of



describes how the symbols, practices and beliefs of the USA as a national community compares to an organised religion, Greer (2013) shows how belief in progress is similarly based on "values that the community considers so self-evident that they stand outside the sphere of reasonable debate" (p. 44), in other words, values that have become ideology<sup>2</sup>. These values pertain to the centrality of humanity within the cosmos as both the past and the future revolve around the belief that "all of human history is a prologue that leads directly and inevitably to us" and proceeds "through us to a future that looks like today's industrial societies but even more so" (ibid., p. 46). Within this historical narrative – and attending social imaginary – progress is framed in terms of temporal concepts and metaphors which conceive of time as unidirectional<sup>3</sup>. This is mirrored in the way the converse of progress is framed either as stagnation or as a complete, catastrophic and final event which annihilates the values that progress represents (cf. Greer, 2012).

While cyclical elements can certainly also be found in ideologies of progress, these enter the progress-stagnation dichotomy which this view of history expresses as a negative (together with the past, nature, tradition, simplicity, etc.) or are assimilated into the linear meta-narrative. In his work on the apocalyptic imaginary, Stefan Skrimshire (2010a) finds that the modern notion of progress subsumes the idea of 'the end' into its logic: "[f]aith in the eventual perfection of creation is coupled with an acceptance of periodic crises in the world. Those crises are seen as an aspect of its unfolding 'reason' or story" (p. 227). The deeper significance of this integration of apocalypse into the imaginary of progress is that crisis becomes a *necessary* feature of history which is reflected in the emergence of climate change as an 'immanent apocalypse' or "the transformation of a future expectation into the perpetuation, and normalization, of the present" (ibid, pp. 232-3). As an ongoing apocalypse, Skrimshire writes, climate change is in danger of becoming a fatalistic narrative where the inadequacy of human agency leads to finding consolation in resignation to a cleansing rupture. In parallel with the 'split' mainstream narrative about climate change which denies the loss that is occurring presently (cf. section 4.2), the view that history progresses through a series of crises leaves little room for dealing with the psychological 'cost' of the scale of present social-ecological crises and the ethical questions that follow.

As an intervention into the apocalyptic imaginary, the Dark Mountain manifesto's claim that current generations are living through 'the end of the world as we know it' departs from the idea of 'the end' as final or cataclysmic and instead invites participants to envision what the 'topography of collapse' might be like – it is not 'the end full stop'

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certain cultural beliefs.

<sup>2</sup>The notion of progress as a civil religion does not imply that progress is simply secularised eschatology. While there are parallels between religious and secular notions of progress – and it has arguably been "the unfortunate fate of later thinking about progress that it inherited from Augustine the immanent teleology and the conception of humanity as the subject of all progress" (Adorno, 2005, p. 146) – it would be a simplification to view modern conceptions of progress as mere reuse of Christian conceptual vocabulary (cf. Wallace, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>It is important to distinguish here between time as a teleological flow towards perfection (or catastrophe) and the notion of irreversibility which ensures the flow of time in a single direction (cf. Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). It is in the former sense the word 'unidirectional' is employed here.

(cf. section 5.3). While mountaineers have very different ideas about the future, there is a general acceptance that many of the amenities of modern societies are likely to disappear, as Paul Kingsnorth expresses it here:

... if you are just gradually getting poorer it's easier to pretend it is not happening [...] You know, my children are going to be poorer than I was, they're going to have less opportunity, they're going to have to pay forty grand to go to university, they're probably not going to have free healthcare, they're not going to have a pension. My parents had all that stuff as well, I haven't got it. You know, we're not horribly poor, we're still some of the richest people in the world but things are getting worse (PK P-I, 11.05.12).

While the idea of a 'slow descent' and an acceptance of limits to the capacities of industrial societies to change many aspects of social-ecological crises could appear as a form of resignation, *Uncivilisation's* 'end of the world' also opens up for a very different imagination of the future: one which takes seriously the irreversibility of many of the processes that have caused social-ecological change and at the same time asks what kind of actions and living make sense in a future where the expectations and promises of progress have failed (see e.g. Figure 6.3 for an artistic expression). A vital aspect of this change is a renewed relationship with time which recognises the temporal diversity that is concealed by the projection of future expectations onto the present.



**Figure 6.3: Jamie Jackson, 'Intertext'. Vinyl print, 2010 ©Jamie Jackson.**

This recuperation of a personal sense of time is not just an abstract intellectual exercise, it connects with the lived temporalities implied by modern forms of organisation, the

social relationships presupposed by contemporary modes of work and the subjugation of natural temporalities to industrial societies (cf. Svenstrup, 2012). Dougal Hine describes the dominant mode of organisation in industrial societies as one of ‘orchestration’ where

... great amounts of effort are synchronised, coordinated and harnessed to the control of a single will [...] The position of the conductor standing on the podium is not so different to the position of the politicians, democratic or otherwise, of the industrial era, addressing unprecedented numbers of people through new technologies which make it possible for one voice to be amplified far beyond its true reach (Hine DM2, p. 264-5).

Mountaineer, writer and author of *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time*, Jay Griffiths observes that this harnessing and subjugation of natural time scales is both an appropriation of the idea of time and a "theft of lifetime at the cutting edge of capitalism" (JG P-I, 14.09.12). She contrasts the abstract notions of time implied by progress with the ‘wild time’ inherent to the diversity of time scales found in the natural world:

... to me the best definition of what is wild is what is self-willed. In early Teutonic and Norse languages the root of ‘wild’ is in ‘will’, something wild is self-willed, uncontrollable: the will and the wild are connected right from the beginning. And so you could almost say that when something is allowed to live fully in its own time it is in a wild time as in a self-willed time. So that’s the time, for instance, of crops to grow in their own time and not the force fed crops of industrial agriculture. And it is what people talk about as mountain time, it’s got its own self-willed time and crucially an integrity which is different from the self-willed time of something else (ibid.).

Here, the connection between the ontology of wildness or enchantment and the poetics of *inhumanism* becomes clear: it is an aesthetic and an attitude which endeavours to experience, as far as is possible, the world on its own terms rather than living in anticipation of future developments to resolve current problems – it is a determination to acknowledge the ‘self-will’ of the natural world and to avoid subjecting it to mechanical temporalities or projections of the future.

Viewed in light of Dark Mountain’s philosophical influences this endeavour can also be described as one which aims to re-integrate those identities and aspects of life which have been separated out or divided into distinct domains within the lifeworld (e.g. belief, nationality, class, ethnicity, social status, etc.) through ongoing historical processes like disenchantment (Weber, 1946), economic rationalisation (Polanyi, 1957), marketisation (Graeber, 2011) and enclosure (McCann, 2005). The perhaps deepest of these divisions is that which separates the human world from the natural world and to move beyond this dichotomy necessarily entails engaging with the experience of place and time. Abram (1997) suggests that "when space and time are reconciled into a single, unified field of phenomena [...] the encompassing earth become[s] evident, once again, in all its power and its depth, as the very ground and horizon of all our knowing" (p. 217). This ‘unhumanised’ view reveals the arbitrariness of our conceptual divisions as well as the deeper

ground of being. Re-enchantment through creative practice and re-examining the deeper role of place and time as primary sources of identity and belonging (see e.g. Figure 6.4 for an artistic expression) can be seen as a rehabilitation of the sensory participation in one's immediate environment which counteracts the tendency to think of the future as a realm to be 'formed and occupied according to rational blueprints'.

This raises the issue of what forms of environment-making arise from the ontology of enchantment, wildness and *inhumanism*: what are the implications in term of new possibilities for 'sustainable' living?



Figure 6.4: Mr. Fox at *The Telling*, February 2013. Own photo

### 6.3 Improvisation as an attitude and mode of organisation

*GQ: How do participants in the Dark Mountain Project approach the deep uncertainties that arise from accepting the 'topography of collapse'?*

The foregoing observations about re-enchantment poses questions about what perceptual and practical skills aid embracing the 'uncontrollability by human will' without inhibiting effective action or provoking despondency. As described in section 5.2, the sustainability narrative of the Dark Mountain Project can be seen as a challenge to the 'risk thinking' of management approaches which deal with social-ecological change by attempting to quantify and control future risks. Insofar as risk thinking is emblematic of the deeper logic and worldview which the Dark Mountain Project reacts against, it is helpful to contrast the

attitude and mindset which characterises Dark Mountain with risk thinking in order to understand the practical and ethical implications of the relational ontology of enchantment. Christopher Groves (2010) describes risk thinking as a 'set of institutional habits of mind' characterised by "the projection of an empty future in which what constitutes optimal performance is judged against the background of uncertainties that are to be assessed as risks" (p. 114) and where "the future is understood primarily in terms of the fate of a finite set of quantitative variables" (p. 116). The knowledges employed to determine risks are based on depersonalised expertise and standardised methods which favour "short-term visibility of results that reduces other dimensions of uncertainty to invisibility, and in doing so violates certain ethical intuitions by incorporating unquestioned value-judgements" (ibid., p. 118), thereby framing decision-making within "a discourse based upon monistic universally commensurable numbers" (Spash, 2007, p. 713). A defining feature of this way of thinking is thus the attempt to purge uncertainty by converting potential future outcomes into probabilities which can be utilised to determine a course of action.

However, in circumstances characterised by high levels of ontological uncertainty, where "the entity structure of actors' worlds change so rapidly that the actors cannot generate stable ontological categories valid for the time periods in which the actions they are about to undertake will continue to generate effects" (2005, p. 10), projecting or predicting future outcomes may become ineffective modes of action because the set of assumptions on which a prognosis is based is inadequate for anticipating outcomes. Further, expanding on Groves observation that risk thinking ignores certain ethical intuitions, Anthony McCann (2005) perceives a basic dislocation of lived experience within this mindset<sup>4</sup>:

"... the more we participate in the discursive 'elimination' of uncertainty, the more we are likely to become alienated from what is happening. The more our discursive renderings of what happens are suffused with the dispositional expectation that uncertainty can be or should be 'eliminated', the more misrepresentative are likely to be our renderings of our experience and of whatever we might refer to as reality" (pp. 228-9).

Striving to achieve certainty about the future can in this way be seen as a fundamental denial of a basic existential condition which exerts a subtle but profound 'epistemological violence' when it is used to govern the futures of others. McCann's research shows how the tendency towards discursive elimination of uncertainty can be reproduced in critiques of management approaches if the premises of the discursive framework are not acknowledged and challenged. In this light, the Dark Mountain Project's ambition to move towards ways of knowing that do not re-enact and perpetuate disenchanting views of place and time – e.g. treating the prospect of deepening social-ecological crises as problems to be solved by forecasting, managing and controlling the future – can be seen as embracing the reality of profound ontological uncertainties regarding the future and experimenting

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<sup>4</sup>McCann's work is building a sociological framework for understanding the dynamics at work in processes of enclosure and commodification, and he has been an important influence within Dark Mountain.

with ways of living within this condition.

This entails giving up on the idea that social-ecological crises can be solved by creating blueprints for the future. But it also implies, more generally, an attitude that takes the expectation of a future resolution to current problems inherent to progress to be fallacious because it ignores how the habits of thought and action which lie at the root of present predicaments are reproduced when imagined solutions are projected onto the future. As Steve Wheeler expresses it:

The opposite of that isn't a different kind of anticipation of something different in the future. It's not living in an abstract future so much, it's living in the now. And that's when we realise improvisation is such a strong part of it, because improvisation is about not anticipating, it's about paying attention to what is now. You think things are going to go one way and – oh no, they are going in a different direction. You just go with that and suddenly the entire future is different, all the possibilities are different. And you're going from there and then it bifurcates again [...] It doesn't mean I'm giving up or backing away, it means that you are just more responsive to what is possible (SW P-I, 14.03.13).

Importantly, 'living in the now' is not just another way of deferring a confrontation with the habits and contradictions of personal modes of thought and action. It involves becoming attentive and responsive to those moments when uncertainty disrupts expectations of the future. As a means of becoming responsive to the possibilities that uncertainty opens up, improvisation has emerged as a core principle and method in many of the inquiries that have developed across different circles of conversation within Dark Mountain.

As a response to the condition of ontological uncertainty, improvisation represents a way of being which focuses on building practical skills and enhancing the courses of action available through creative practice, play and experimentation. Improvisation (from *improvisus*, unforeseen) is the skill of unrehearsed action in the face of unanticipated circumstances, and it is a key practice in creative activities including artistic expression and problem solving. As an art form, improvisation relies on intuition, technique and skill and it is an important capacity in theatre, performance and storytelling. In *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Keith Johnstone, a key influence on Dark Mountain thinkers and practitioners of improvisation, describes improvisation as a craft which involves disrupting the routines and habits that hold spontaneous creativity in check. His experience as a teacher and director showed him that a lack of creativity is not rooted in inherent dullness but in a blocking of the imagination. Responding creatively is thus often a matter of changing view: "If I say 'Make up a story', then most people are paralysed. If I say 'describe a routine and then interrupt it', people see no problem" (Johnstone, 1989, 138). A such, improvisation is also a life skill which opens up new perspectives by learning to be attentive to what is going on in the moment and getting to grips with how to respond creatively to that. It can be seen as a form of action which implies detachment from outcomes, attention to means, and openness to the surrounding environment – in many ways corresponding to an attitude of 'being open to the unexpected' (cf. section 4.6).



**Figure 6.5: Mearcstapa eyed at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Own photo.**

Improvisation as an attitude and method is visible both in the evolution of Dark Mountain itself (cf. section 6.6) and in the conversations it has sparked (see e.g. Figure 6.5 for an artistic expression). It came up frequently as a theme in my interview-conversations (see e.g. Appendix F) and as a concept it helped make sense of the co-creation of narratives about Dark Mountain which took place in those conversations (O-D, 18.03.12). In our interview-conversation, Alex Fradera, a scholar and improvisational performer, described improvisation as a way of "[t]rying to gauge with more input than just what the rational mind is trying to plan for you: to predict and control the shape of things, and to get you to a safe place" (AF P-I, 31.01.13). Crucially, it embodies a radically different approach to the future than risk thinking: "when we think about Progress and solutions and so on, one of the things that improvisation emphasises is that the solutions lie behind you rather than in front of you" (ibid.). Fradera describes listening, presence and generosity as core values and characteristics of improvisation which makes the improviser able to deal with, and draw strength from, vulnerability and uncertainty. He sees improvisation as a process which produces emergent outcomes rather than predefined outputs: they grow from within a given situation rather than being implemented through set procedures which require predefined elements. This also means that improvisation is a skill which is valuable in situations where material resources are few or lacking:

... improvisation is actually incredibly well honed over the years to be an art form that operates within [conditions of scarcity]. Because it doesn't need power to survive,

it doesn't need planning, scripting and so on. You don't need a wealth of people to prepare and make something happen. It's in person so you don't need any technology to mediate it [...] it's a highly democratic and a highly resilient piece of art technology that any society can use to entertain themselves (ibid.).

As a practice, improvisation works to develop presence – "when we think ahead, we miss most of what's happening" (Johnstone, 1999, p. 131), spontaneity – "we struggle against our imaginations, especially when we try to be imaginative" (ibid., p. 105), and narrative through recurrence – "stories achieve structure by referring back to earlier events" (ibid., p. 131). Thus, improvisation skills can create meaningful and effective responses without having to refer to pre-planned ideas or requiring specific resources.

Dougald Hine proposes that improvisation offers a radically different principle for social organisation to that of orchestration (cf. section 6.2) as it involves learning to communicate and partake in complex relationships without continually having to arrive at an expressed agreement or consensus (see also section 6.6). He sees such smaller, decentralised and flexible modes of organisation to be likely to play an increasingly important role in the functioning of social institutions within situations characterised by high degrees of ontological uncertainty. However, viewed from the meta-narrative of progress this can often seem like a step 'backwards' and Hine suggests that within the 'topography of collapse' (cf. section 5.3) it is necessary to rethink the role and value of the past:

What gets us through the times ahead may well be those moments when we look backwards and find something from earlier in the story that we can pull through, that becomes useful again. Our leaders are very fond of talking about 'innovation', the point at which some new device enters social reality; we don't seem to have an equivalent word for when things that are old-fashioned, obsolete and redundant come into their own in the hour of need (Hine DM2, p. 269).

As an attitude to innovation, improvisation is more concerned with developing personal abilities and perceptual skills that make new relations between people, objects and environments possible than developing novel artefacts. As Alex Fradera reflects about this: "much of the transformation is in the way that we see things rather than trying to change the external environment" (AF P-I, 31.01.13). The resurfacing of ways of doing 'from earlier in the story' is visible at the Uncivilisation festivals in the teaching and sharing of historic crafts and techniques, folk song and storytelling, body practices, plant medicine, wild foods, traditional tools and the recreation of rituals. These practices offer personal ways of becoming more independent of industrial society while they are routes into connecting with the natural world.

By engaging with improvisation as a skill and a mode of organising that is able to respond effectively and creatively to situations characterised by deep uncertainty, it is possible to sidestep some of the deadlocks that a logo-centric insistence on comprehensive answers and formal governance can induce. As a life skill, improvising means letting go of the idea of control, becoming accustomed to seeing problematics from different



viewpoints and learning to read and respond to other people non-verbally. For the ‘narrator as poet’, improvisation is an important way of unblocking the imagination, finding new viewpoints and weaving new meanings into the lifeworld in collaboration with others. Alex Fradera describes how a ‘group mind’ and shared outcomes can emerge from improvisation when different perspectives are mutually acknowledged, listened to and incorporated so that they converge on a conclusion which is unique in that it is unpredictable and dependent on each participant’s contribution. In this sense, improvising, when it works, creates wholeness out of difference by developing a shared viewpoint or story from each individual perspective (see e.g. Figure 6.6). The next section continues to explore how the approach and attitude described here connect with the development of human-scale ways of living.



Figure 6.6: Closing ceremony at *Uncivilisation* 2012. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.

## 6.4 Craft and the vernacular

*GQ: What forms of life are implied by the transformation in worldviews and life narratives within the Dark Mountain Project?*

The shift in focus away from macroscopic solutions towards the possibilities inherent to the present at a personal level has been interpreted as a withdrawal into survivalism (Hogget 2011). While withdrawal is a notion which for many mountaineers constitute a necessary part of the response to ‘living within the machine’, dismissing this attitude as one of superiority fails to recognise the politics inherent to this stance. Rather than striving to change the world through ‘orchestrating’ and controlling the future, this is a

position which asks "what power do you have to preserve what is of value – creatures, skills, things, places?" (Kingsnorth DM3, p. 25). It is a 'micro-politics' which holds the potential to recuperate 'hope beyond hope' insofar as it empowers action on a level that is commensurate with the possibilities, abilities and reach that characterises each individual lifeworld (see e.g. Dougal Hine and Anthony McCann's conversation about this politics, Hine and McCann 30.04.14). Once the framework of risk thinking and the need for certainty is suspended, the drive to reach for solutions that aim to 'fix' social-ecological crises begins to seem less attractive – striving for solutions appear as part of a way of thinking which perpetuates the problems themselves by transmuting what can be done in the present into an expectation of resolution in the future. This is difficult to accept, especially from within a worldview which sees uncertainty as an obstacle to effective action. Many of the contentions created by *Uncivilisation*, both within and beyond Dark Mountain, have revolved around some aspect of this difficulty and it has been part of my own struggle of coming to terms with the irreversibility of social-ecological crises as can be seen in the various outputs produced in the process of this research. However, as the flourishing of uncivilised art and writing that celebrate the experience of being human attest, giving up on finding technological or political 'solutions' to the 'problems' of climate change, species extinction and overconsumption without succumbing to survivalism or hopelessness is a distinct possibility.

Rather than offering a hope that everything will turn out for the best in the 'topography of collapse' indicated by unfolding social-ecological crises, this perspective provides a possibility that it is not necessary to strive for solutions or answers to be part of change. The agency implied by this attitude is apparent in Tony Dias' contrasting of the forms of behaviour involved in technology and craft:

Technology is a set of *mapped* behaviours, a programming. Technique is a recipe. When we follow recipes we cease engaging with reality. Our focus centres on the needs of the recipe. Our purpose shifts from doing what *can be done* to ignoring how the world is different from our expectations. In our frustration at the increasing divergence between the two, we fall into *negotiation*. We haggle with reality to maintain our illusions. We strive so as to bolster them. We focus on *means* to arrive at *ends*. *Ends* we forget are conditional (TD P-I, 25.10.12).

On the other hand, Dias sees craft as 'a conversation between meaning and contingency' which involves "bring[ing] all the wisdom available to us from within our person, our culture, and our cultural traditions to bear" on our interaction with the physical world (TD P-I, 20.11.12). Craft, as a mode of interaction, moves away from preconceived and habitual behaviours by bringing attention to the immediate experience of the world and its self-organising relations. In 'reconfiguring our relationship with what is possible' (cf. section 4.3) craft plays a vital role as a way of finding out what constitutes valuable and meaningful action. Learning 'what is real and what's not', Paul Kingsnorth finds, means to "[g]round yourself in things and places, learn or practice human-scale convivial skills" (Kingsnorth DM3, p. 25). As such, craft is also an ethic which values place-based and

autonomous forms of living (see e.g. Figure 6.7). This is reflected in the role of the vernacular, understood as ‘forms of life rooted in the household and the commons’ (Hine and Samuel DM3), in different circles of conversations within the Dark Mountain Project.



**Figure 6.7: Making iron in a clay foundry at *The Telling* 2013. Own photo.**

The vernacular is a term that was revived by Ivan Illich (1980) to denote ‘the inverse of a commodity’ or activities and relationships within the informal economy that have not been monetised. An astute observer of the rise of the development discourse from the 1960s onwards, Illich saw the increasing dependence on commodities as a form of ‘modernised poverty’ or ‘disabling affluence’ which undermined craft skills, traditional knowledges and autonomous living through a market ideology which “forcibly substituted standardized packages for almost everything people formerly did or made on their own” (1978, p. 24). Illich identified the emergence of specialised discourses as an obstacle to countering the ‘modernisation of poverty’ because jargon makes the social relations implied by commodification resistant to analysis – language itself becomes ‘corrupted’ (a similar conclusion to Abram’s above). The notion of the vernacular is in this way an attempt to recuperate a language for ways of living which evade commodification. Dougald Hine sees the term as a way of talking about ‘the reemergence of the things which made life liveable in the past’, as it represents

... the mode of life (in all its plurality) which was overshadowed by the rise of industrialism, in which the dominant form of production was within the household or the local community, while commodities traded for money formed an exceptional class of

goods. As industrial society destroys itself, the remnants of the vernacular emerge from the shadows, not as some prospect of a return to an earlier and simpler way of life, but as clues to how we may continue to make life work and make it worth living (Hine and Samuel DM3, p. 92).

In providing such clues, revaluing and rethinking the vernacular opens a possibility for decreasing dependence on the global market economy and building the craft skills and knowledges needed to sustain a good quality of life within the ‘topography of collapse’.

A major barrier to this, as Illich pinpointed in his analysis of the corruption of language by jargon, is the way that the logic and presumptions of commodification have become embedded in the language and mindset of governance itself. Sajak Samuel observes about management approaches (such as risk thinking) that:

The first thing to note about the systems administrator, he does not inhabit the space or the *place* that people inhabit. Forms of knowledge that grow out of practices that are embodied and in place are foreign to and antithetical to the ways and styles of thinking that managers and systems administrators presuppose (ibid., p. 99).

For vernacular and craft-based ways of living to flourish, Samuel says, the disembodied way of seeing of management thinking has first to be questioned and delegitimised, which entails dismantling the ‘hidden consensus’ that frames the discussion about societal development (cf. section 5.5). This points to the basic, but far-reaching, challenge involved in reviving human-scale, post-industrial forms of life: it is tantamount to a ‘Copernican revolution in our values’, as Ivan Illich puts it, which involves a rethinking of the inclination of progress to see ‘development’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘innovation’ as novel improvements of a redundant past (see also section 6.5). From the perspective of the vernacular, that is perhaps – more than any lack of new technology, artefacts or ideas – the fundamental problematic that needs to be addressed to make sustainable forms of living possible on any larger scale.

And this is the ‘hope beyond hope’ faced with the ‘topography of collapse’: that such revaluing will generate new meanings and purpose within individual and collective lifeworlds which make less resource-intensive lifestyles desirable and worthwhile. As Ran Prieur imagines:

Life will get more painful but also more meaningful, as billions of human hours shift from processing paperwork and watching TV to intensive learning of new skills to keep ourselves alive. These skills will run the whole range, from tracking deer to growing tomatoes to fixing bicycles to building solar-powered wi-fi networks – to new things we won’t even imagine until we have our backs to the wall (Prieur DM1, pp. 134-5).

The resurgence of craft and DIY ethics (see e.g. Gauntlett, 2011), decentralised forms of production (see e.g. Carson, 2010) and community-based culture (see e.g. Britton, 2010) could indicate that vernacular forms of life are becoming increasingly possible. Warren Draper reflects on this vision:

We are now, in other words, approaching a position where it may be possible to create once again an infrastructure built upon localised, craft-orientated, community-based, ecologically sensitive, production techniques [...] The artisan, it seems, is coming back from the brink of extinction – just as progressive civilisation itself begins to tip over the brink (Draper DM2, p. 148).

There is a wide range of examples of an ethics of craft and vernacular living within the Dark Mountain Project, some of which have appeared at the festivals while many are expressed in mountaineers personal lives, communities and projects. As such they have not grown out of Dark Mountain (although some have) as much as Dark Mountain has become a place to converge for this kind of thinking and living (as illustrated by Figure 6.8). And this is where Dark Mountain as an entity overlaps, branches out and intertwines with a wide range of other initiatives, ideas and practices.



**Figure 6.8: Parachute stage at *Uncivilisation* 2013. Own photo.**

## 6.5 Innovation at the level of the rules

*GQ: How do new social institutions emerge from the mutual inquiries that take place within the Dark Mountain Project?*

It now possible see how the cultural intervention of the Dark Mountain Project in the social imaginary is a reframing of the rules of environment-making which shifts the experiential and discursive field in which we think and talk about nature, social change

and responses to social-ecological crises. By building a language based on concepts, metaphors and ways of speaking which represent qualitatively different social relations to that of progress, it becomes possible to engage imaginatively with other ways of seeing. This opens up for a re-orientation of the attitude and values which guide individual action. Importantly, Dark Mountain provides a 'curated space' where the complex and perplexing process of unlearning certain habits and beginning to establish and manifest new personal practices can take place. The quality of this space is crucial for its transformative potential, it requires confidence and trust in the fellow inquirers and skill on behalf of those who hold the space of inquiry. Engaging in different circles of conversation, the individual 'narrator as poet' encounters new stories, plots and ways of speaking which she can weave into her own lived experience as she moves through the threshold or *liminal* space of re-narration. By creating an awareness about the co-constitutive nature of stories, the 'poet-narrator' can begin to discern the deeper significance of the meta-narrative in which she is immersed. As described in these chapters, this is a slow and gradual process which involves engaging with the deep assumptions which shape an individual worldview but it produces a qualitatively different experience of reality. As such, the individual and collective re-storying among mountaineers can be seen as a transformation in the ontological assumptions which guide environment-making and give meaning to the lifeworld (cf. Chapter 2). However, in this view, the rules of environment-making do not exist independently of the people and objects they affect, they are embodied in the lived stories and relationships they describe.

This transformation provides a radically different set of values, metaphors and narratives to those implied by the meta-narrative of progress. The ontology of enchantment, which invites wildness, myth and the sacred into the lifeworld, implies a way of being in which a user-resource relation with the natural world no longer makes sense because it reduces, or mutes altogether, the 'voices of place', or the language in which the non-human world speaks, by asserting that such communication is useless, irrelevant or impossible. The poetics of *inhumanism*, on the other hand, holds that the natural world is immersed in story and that those stories are deeply intertwined with the human world and hold important clues to the future. It is a way of seeing in which accounts of evolution and human progress on their own are insufficient to provide a coherent worldview. And where stories have their own life – they can be embodied but not controlled. The significance of this point became particularly evident in my interview-conversation with Andrew Taggart in which we inquired about the role of metaphors and language in building new social institutions. He contrasted the imagery associated with 'scarcity', in which humans are motivated by self preservation to compete over resources, with that of 'abundance' where there is just enough for everyone. These two sets of metaphors not only present contrasting views of the world, they represent radically different ways of being in the world when they become embodied in social relations. Taggart suggests that any account of social change or innovation first needs to ask about what kind of ontology – and therefore what kind of metaphors and stories – is apt for building healthy relationships and social institutions:

... we need to have some understanding of what first a human being is like, and second what a good human being is like. And if we can get some kind of understanding of those questions, then it should follow that we begin to see institutions being the very kinds of activities, kinds of structured activities that enhance the growth and development and flourishing-ness of human beings (AT P-I, 31.03.21).

Finding the metaphors and stories that can express the activities, practices and relationships that support a flourishing life, is also a way of finding effective and regenerative ways of responding to the ‘topography of collapse’. It can be seen as a process of building a personal conceptual and ethical compass with which to navigate uncertainty.

Taggart speaks of this kind of inquiry and experimentation as a recursive process which provides a ‘scaffolding’ for thinking about social change through the gradual and emerging structure of a mutual language. This is not simply an intellectual process, it gives rise to new practices and social institutions as the activities that flow from this way of seeing manifests in the lifeworld. This is immediately visible in the way Taggart has established his practice as a philosophical counsellor on the principles of a gift economy<sup>5</sup>. The enabling of vernacular ways of life clearly also has a material aspect in the tools and modes of production that make such lifestyles possible. However, a focus on artefacts needs to avoid being reduced to a question of finding technological ‘solutions’ to decontextualised problems. Vinay Gupta, engineer and designer of the Hexayurt housing model<sup>6</sup>, explains how he deliberately ‘de-narrativised’ the Hexayurt in order to be able to ‘graft it as a prop into other people’s stories’ (VG P-I, 26.03.13). By taking the narrative out of the artefact, designing it so that it cannot be fundamentally abused and then letting people use it as a prop in their own story, it is possible to build tools that empower vernacular ways of life without simply becoming recipes which hold a promise to ‘fix’ a problem. Gupta reflects that:

The props are the key. It’s the relationship between the physical props and the story that is really the locus of action. So what I figured out was: you make new quasi-physical props, the stories change because now they have new props available they didn’t have before. I don’t need to control the story because there are only so many kinds of stories you can tell with this prop. It guides a particular kind of narrative (ibid.).

In this way, ‘props’ can resist being enrolled in solutions-focussed narratives of progress. The purpose of technologies as ‘props’ in vernacular life becomes the fulfilment of immediate needs rather than wealth accumulation (see Rao DM2). As an exponent of the open source movement, Gupta sees ‘prop’ engineering as a way of enabling the gradual

<sup>5</sup>In this process, Andrew Taggart has developed his own philosophy and model of practicing counselling based on the gift economy, see e.g.: <http://andrewjamestaggart.com/how-we-work-together/> or <http://andrewjtaggart.com/2012/02/28/gift-economy-explained-justified-and-defended/>.

<sup>6</sup>The Hexayurt is a low cost, modular yurt made out of standard industrial materials, see <http://hexayurt.com/>.

transformation of the lifeworld around a radically different story and compass of values and concepts (see Figure 6.9).



**Figure 6.9: Putting up a hexayurt at *Uncivilisation* 2011. Photo by London Permaculture Flickr.**

As suggested throughout this chapter, the transformative potential of the mutual inquiries within the Dark Mountain Project pertains not so much to individuals or artefacts seen independently of their contexts but rather concerns the dynamic perceptual, linguistic, and imaginative attributes which establish the relations of people and objects – as expressed and developed in stories. This re-narration is a transformation of the way subjectivity, relationality and the lifeworld more generally are perceived and given meaning. It is critical that this is an emergent and gradual process which occurs through individual sense-making and the development of a personal vocabulary rather than simply being a reproduction of terms and concepts. The openness of the language of *Uncivilisation* has been important in allowing mountaineers to co-create their own understanding and use of this imagery. In the process of inquiry new practices and ways of doing can then be established within each lifeworld. Viewed as a type of innovation, the re-narration that takes place within Dark Mountain occurs at the conceptual plane of the imaginary and yet emerges from, and is responsive to, the lived experience it reconstructs. Looking across the different manifestations of Dark Mountain it is possible to observe four recurring elements of this process:

- a delegitimisation of the perspective and language of the ‘systems administrator’ or approaches which begin from highly abstract assumptions and aim to eliminate uncertainty. Conversely, this is an encouragement of embodied, creative and intuitive forms of knowledge;



- the creation of ‘safe spaces’ in which spontaneous and authentic forms of expression and interaction are possible. This also involves strengthening an attitude which move beyond conventional forms of argumentation towards one which does not strive for definite answers;
- experimentation with concepts, practices and ways of doing and speaking which explore a different mindset to that of progress. While some of these activities are planned they are uncontrollable and, by learning to become responsive to the emergent nature of such mutual experimentation, personal abilities to respond to conditions of uncertainty grow; and,
- sharing the learning, inquiries and stories which arise in the process. This occurs both in written form in the journals and on the Dark Mountain blog as well as in live gatherings and meetings.

These conditions aid the process of destabilising and re-narrating the assumptions and outlook of the meta-narrative of progress. This process requires first of all that habitual reactions and preconceptions are engaged creatively. To be creative means first to be original and creative about the *reactions* that lead to the reliance on the ‘recipes’ of technique (cf. section 6.3). Because new ways of doing within Dark Mountain grow not from acquiring a pre-existing answer to a particular question, but from *learning to inquire* into a set of questions without imposing one’s preconceptions, the need for recipes and set answers recedes as the ability to respond creatively grows.

By reworking the framing of particular questions they can in this way be oriented around a different attitude and set of values. For example, reframing the sustainability challenge within the narrative of a ‘topography of collapse’ presents a radically different set of questions than the perspective provided by the meta-narrative of progress. But the crucial aspect to grasp is that it cannot be put into the service of providing ‘solutions’ – that would be another instance of attempting to close down uncertainty. The important outcome of the process is that, from the perspective of the lifeworld, a qualitatively different experience of reality is brought forth (and the experiential value of the questions and problematics change accordingly). I will discuss the theoretical implications of this view of innovation and social change further in the next chapter, for now it suffices to say that the process of re-narrating the lifeworld opens the possibility for establishing qualitatively different relations within the lifeworld through building new conceptual and perceptual skills. These abilities provide the ‘narrator as poet’ both with a creative attitude and an extended vocabulary with which to navigate uncertainty. From this position, the creation of new social institutions emerge from the condition of reciprocity rather than by preconceived design. This is visible in many of the projects and practices that mountaineers undertake – such as those described in this section – as well as in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project itself.

## 6.6 Down the dark mountain

*GQ: How is the underlying vision and narrative of the Dark Mountain Project expressed in its organisation and development?*

The emergence of the Dark Mountain Project as a serious voice in the debate about social-ecological crises should be seen both in terms of the vision and capacities of its founders and key organisers, and in the various perspectives, skills and networks that participants have brought to the wider conversations sparked by *Uncivilisation*. The response to the manifesto and the people who stepped into the conversations that followed have shaped the project as much as the initial idea, and in this way Dark Mountain gradually became a much broader cultural project as people with different skill sets and ideas were attracted to it. The development of Dark Mountain as a community of inquiry can in many ways be seen as an expression of the mode of organisation implied by improvisation: it is evident both in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project from a manifesto to a wider network of participants and in the way it functions as an organisation. Improvisation has worked as an organisational principle foremost through trust, working with the resources available, openness to the unexpected, avoiding to 'plan too far ahead' and sharing responsibility based on alignment with the core vision and principles of *Uncivilisation*. This is visible in the creation of spaces where people with the right skills and ideas could step in and take the spaces forward and in the openness towards letting Dark Mountain take forms that were not initially expected. Thus, from an idea for a journal, it went beyond a literary project when the offer of a venue for a festival came up and the festival itself developed from something which was set up in the style of a conference to become a gathering which relied on, and was shaped by, various people curating stages and self-organising spaces and events.

Many aspects of setting up and running the Dark Mountain Project have been similar to those of other grassroots organisations with minimal resources. The initial reliance on a few key people without any stable sources of income meant that the burden of work at times threatened the organisers with burn out. Broadening the conversation relied on personal networks and online platforms, and the manifesto and first issues of the journal were realised through crowdfunding campaigns. At times, the position of the project had to be defended against accusations and misinterpretations, and the role of leadership was developed in a process of contestation. Initial conversations revolved around what Dark Mountain *should* be and sometimes reproduced the modes of interaction it had reacted against. These circumstances and events were in themselves processes of learning, improvisation and confrontation with habits. With time, the project attracted enough interest to secure sufficient funding to not rely exclusively on volunteers and a broader team and a steering committee were established. The support received in the initial years meant that the book publications could move to a subscription-based model and there was enough submissions to begin publishing twice a year. And as the project gradually established

itself as a (bi-)annual publication and a festival, the language and rhetoric of *Uncivilisation* began to develop into the ideas and ethos described in these chapters within different circles of conversation.

While the Dark Mountain Project could certainly not have come into existence and proliferated without the dedicated and ongoing work Kingsnorth, Hine and a broadening team of organisers put into building and maintaining an online presence, editing and publishing the journals, arranging festivals and events (see e.g. Figure 6.10) as well as managing the ‘brand’ of Dark Mountain, the role of the poetic vision behind the manifesto in attracting participants can hardly be understated. As described in Chapter 4, *Uncivilisation* opened up a discursive space where many of the unspoken questions about deepening social-ecological crises within mainstream narratives about climate change could be discussed. What is more, the framing of this conversation as a journey set within the open-ended imagery of ‘uncivilising’, provides an entry point which allows participants to engage imaginatively with the particular questions they bring with them. Journeying as a metaphor creates both a sense of exploration and of fellowship. The question *what do you do, after you stop pretending?* encourages participants to let go of a defensive mindset which clings to answers and admit to themselves what is and is not possible. The ‘dark’ vision of ‘the end of the world as we know it’ where we collectively find ourselves ‘poised trembling on the edge’ of a change that will affect everything we know about the future, motivates questions about what is valued in the present and which things can or will be lost. In this sense, the vision of the Dark Mountain Project is not only sombre but also invites mountaineers to consider what constitutes a good life, congruous social relations and, more broadly, a healthy community and society. And as a sustainability narrative, *Uncivilisation* is a challenge to the fundamental user-resource relationship inherent to the mainstream sustainability discourse.

The shifts in onto-epistemological beliefs which characterise the move away from relating to ‘nature’ as *resource* or *other*, towards a relationship where human agency is recognised to be constituted by, and inextricably entangled with, the more-than-human world, is a complex and personal process which is unique to each individual lifeworld. As these chapters have shown, within the Dark Mountain Project this is actively engaged as a creative process of challenging the meta-narrative of progress, re-imagining the lifeworld and beginning to embody a different kind of life narrative. In doing so, the ‘narrator as poet’ simultaneously abandons a set of habits, attitudes and narrative framings, which cast the lifeworld as fundamentally separate from its wider environment, and acquires a new set of narrative skills, modes of inquiring and personal practices. This can be seen as a transformation of the beliefs, values, metaphors and stories that guide the individual lifeworld through creating a different conceptual and ethical compass with which to navigate the lifeworld. By embracing the radical uncertainty of the ‘topography of collapse’ the ‘poet-narrator’ gives up hope that the future can continue to provide for present resource-intensive lifestyles. But the loss of hope – and the grief that follows – does not mean the end of hope *per se* as new meanings emerge in the process of inquiring into what the future without progress might imply.

As a cultural movement, the Dark Mountain Project curates spaces, conversations, art and writing in which this form of inquiry can take place, individually and collectively. But the inquiry itself is a personal undertaking that does not ‘take place’ within a limited space: it is an ongoing process which includes the whole lifeworld. In this way, Dark Mountain inspires, encourages and supports the inquiry while this is not an activity that requires membership or agreement with a consensus view. Kingsnorth and Hine explicitly state the main purpose and aim of Dark Mountain to be creating spaces where a different kind of conversation and experience is possible, building on the ‘uncivilised’ body of literature and art, and giving voice and form to the poetics of *inhumanism* – not to gather members or followers. Kingsnorth holds that the Dark Mountain Project will exist only as long as it is fulfilling a need and will be wound up when people stop interacting with it, and he sees the organisational challenge of this approach as reaching out to people who are ready to engage with this kind of inquiry and broadening the conversation without being evangelist or becoming ‘mainstream’ (PK I-C, 28.01.13). Arriving at this attitude has also been a personal challenge, he recalls the first ‘chaotic’ years that followed the publication of *Uncivilisation* as a process of learning how to describe and speak about the Dark Mountain Project as well as finding a minimal model for keeping the project afloat organisationally.



**Figure 6.10: Closing of the fourth and, so far, final *Uncivilisation* festival in 2013. Photo by Bridget McKenzie.**

The movement from ‘raising the flag’ of the manifesto towards a loose community of people who are doing their own events and creative projects has shown Kingsnorth how a network can ‘coalesce’ around a vision rather than being actively ‘built’. This also means that he sees the future development of Dark Mountain as depending on where participants

take it. Dougal Hine observes that the tension created by the ‘megaphone language’ of the manifesto has gradually decreased as the concepts and attitude of *Uncivilisation* have been clarified, contested and expressed in different circles of conversation (DH I-C, 24.01.13). He reflects that the willingness and ability to "sit with incompleteness and puzzlement and brokenness, and not impose anything on it" (DH P-I, 18.11.11) is an experience which cannot be encountered in many places within mainstream culture and that a key challenge for the future of Dark Mountain is to ‘localise’ and find ways that mountaineers can take their experiences back to their respective communities. Hine describes Dark Mountain as a safe space for transformative conversations where there is no emotional pressure but also as a space for a particular kind of conversation which cannot be extended to the whole of life:

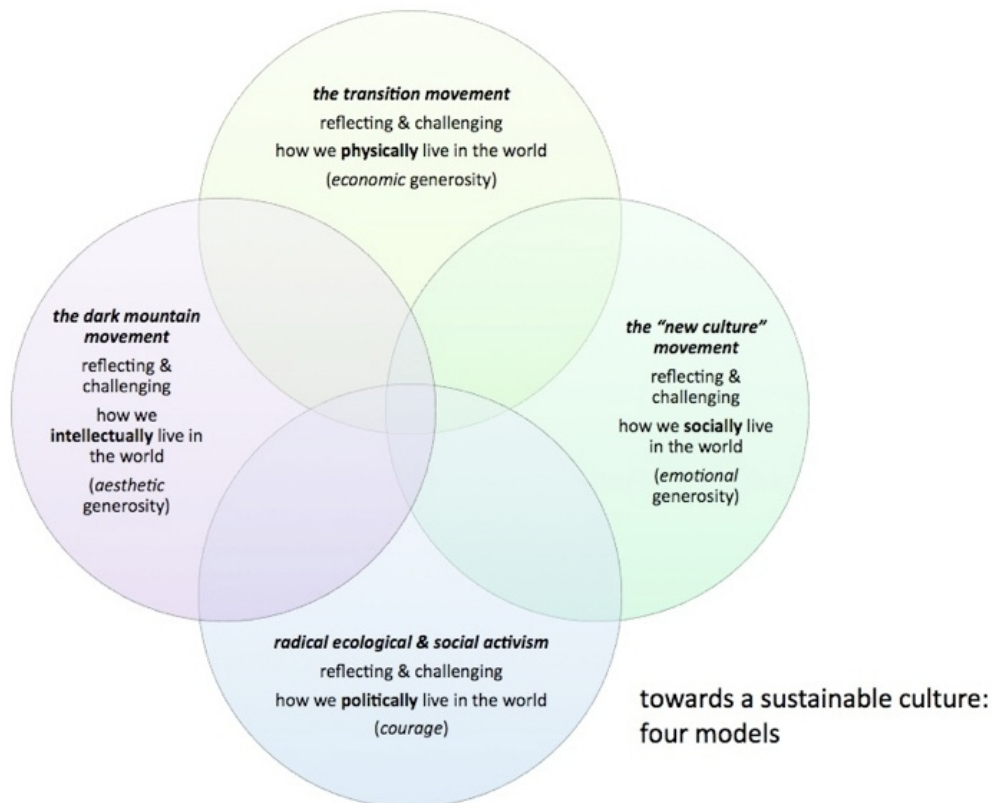
Dark Mountain was not the space in which you lived your whole life. It was a space that you came to for certain things. Within that space certain things were possible that weren't possible within the space that we spend our everyday lives but, equally, many of the things that we have to do in our everyday lives can't be done from the space that Dark Mountain operates in (DH I-C, 24.01.13).

He speaks of the Dark Mountain Project as a ‘changing room between stories’ where different aspects of one’s personal identity can be challenged and changed. Both Kingsnorth and Hine suggest that Dark Mountain is part of a wider, but more diffuse, movement which is questioning progress.

The question of the Dark Mountain Project being part of a movement – and in itself being a movement – has been a recurring point of conversation. Mountaineers view and position Dark Mountain differently in relation to other movements and projects they are part of, see e.g. Figure 6.11. Dougal Hine uses the image of concentric circles to describe the ‘distributed community’ of Dark Mountain where "[p]eople move in and out of these circles over time, as their relationship to the organisation changes" (Hine 20.03.13, na.). The notion of viewing the Dark Mountain Project as a movement has also been resisted by various participants. Tony Dias sees a danger in thinking of mountaineering as being part of a movement insofar as this turns into another instance of ‘negotiation’ which leads to "perpetuating shared illusions instead of helping us engage with reality. Everyone’s focus devolves into defending preconceived notions" (TD P-I, 25.10.12). He suggests that mountaineering is instead a form of ‘re-integration’ within the larger movement of life (TD P-I, 11.12.12). As a reaction to the now global "tendency of the contemporary world to fragment communities" it has been argued that a ‘movement without a name’ is emerging which "derive from a common set of (albeit often inchoate) desires: for knowledge, for connection, for empowerment, for stimulation – and from a common sense of possibility" (Kahn-Harris, 2011, na.)<sup>7</sup>. Kahn-Harris, a sociologist and collaborator of Dougal Hine, suggests that this nameless movement is like "a source of energy that can be traced

<sup>7</sup>See also Aaron Bastani’s (2011) reply to Kahn-Harris’ article, and Paul Mason’s (2012) *Guardian* article.

through a large number of spaces and projects" and which grows without any central direction (ibid.). Insofar as the paradox of a 'movement without a name' is viable – and it is possible to avoid reducing or simplifying such an idea of a movement to an abstract concept which then becomes the object of yet further argumentation and fragmentation – it will be characterised by diversity and dissensus (cf. section 4.6), comprising irreducible differences and disagreement about core ideas (Greer, 2008a). No matter whether the Dark Mountain Project is constructed as a cultural movement or a distributed community of inquiry, it is clear that its first five years has shown the possibility of a different kind of thinking and interaction which does not depend on a shared ideology or a programme of action. And yet without consensus and an ambition to change the world, Dark Mountain continues to attract people who are challenging the conventions and ideas of progress (it will be interesting to see how the project develops after the discontinuation of the centrally organised festival).



**Figure 6.11: 'Towards a sustainable culture'. Source: Pollard 06.09.10.**

This raises the question: what led to the diffusion of Dark Mountain as a grassroots project which aims to 'shift worldviews' rather than promote particular goals or innovations? Specifically, how did the onto-epistemological assumptions which characterise the Dark Mountain Project spread? These questions open up for a whole subset of further lines of inquiry which will be discussed in the next chapter. A preliminary answer, indicated by the present inquiry, suggests that by (de)legitimising particular ways of speaking, providing an open-ended alternative imaginary and supporting a re-storying of the wider

narrative of the lifeworld, the Dark Mountain Project has both given voice to a previously unarticulated narrative and made a story available which resonates with other collectives and projects who are facing similar quandaries. This goes deeper than creating a new 'meme', disseminating 'facts' or developing an alternative 'rule-set', it changes the narrative environment in which individual ideas, behaviours or rules circulate. From the point of view that stories have their own life (cf. sections 4.7 and 5.4), this is a process of inhabiting a story which in many ways exists independently of the individual but which becomes a deepening reality as it is embodied within the lifeworld. As a re-imagining of narratives of progress and an embodiment of the ontology of enchantment, this re-storying opens a door to see our individual lives and communities as being part of a whole, a wider community. It is a story of how we can co-inhabit the world and find a place in history which does not reproduce social atomisation, unrestrained competition, oppositional thinking and commodification. An intergenerational story of a time and place in which the beliefs and ethics of a reality where we see ourselves as fundamentally interconnected with the fate of all the other beings we co-inhabit the planet with – whether humans, animals, mountains, ecosystems, weather systems, glaciers or plankton – begin to guide our lives. A recognition that our thinking needs to reflect that reality and listen to the wisdom inherent to the voices of older cultures, the places we live and the wider natural world.

This story, while incomplete and nameless, holds a conceptual and ethical compass with which to orientate the deep uncertainties that characterise the 'topography of collapse'. But the point is not so much to theorise the story itself as to embody it, nourish it by living as if it was a reality and align with it so that it becomes as natural a part of the story of our lives as all the other 'facts' of our personal identities. Then it can be recognised in the communities and struggles of others who are moving in the same direction – not towards a time in the future but as a way of being which no longer sees humanity and nature as separate. As David Abram (1997) suggests:

"Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are "true" or "false," but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth" (p. 264).

Thus, the story lives where people are 'faithful to the sensuous world itself' and continue to develop ways of seeing and speaking which do not conform with a limited story or narrative framing which separates societies from their environments and the knower from the known.

**Chapter summary:** This chapter has explored the ways in which the approach to re-narrating the lifeworld examined in the previous chapters affect the deeper notions of space and time, and how mountaineers approach the ontological uncertainties implied by the 'topography of collapse'. This inquiry described how the re-narration of the lifeworld around *place* and embodied temporalities can be seen as a form of *re-enchantment* in

which the notion of the sacred is invited into the lifeworld as a communion with nature and which opens up for altering the experience of nature as other. By shifting attention away from projected expectations of the future towards the present, a radically different way of being is encountered: the ontology of enchantment presents an approach to the future which embraces uncertainty, otherness and wildness. This investigation has also shown how developing the faculty of attention and the practical skills of improvisation opens up for creative responses to conditions of uncertainty. When this is practiced with others, improvisation provides a principle which enables emergent outcomes and organisational flexibility. The ethical and political dimensions of this approach imply a revaluing of the 'vernacular' as a mode of life which is less resource-intensive, craft-based and autonomous. The creation of safe spaces in which to experiment with alternative ways of expression and interaction has been key in enabling such re-narration of personal identities within the Dark Mountain Project. This underlines the importance of attending to the framing of mutual inquiries: the values implied by the metaphors, concepts and ideas which structure an interaction affect outcomes in profound (and unexpected) ways. A key finding is that encouraging the experimentation with, and flourishing of, personal terms and concepts – as well as avoiding to close down meanings prematurely – is vital for this re-narration of the individual lifeworld.

This chapter also suggests that the wider narrative of the Dark Mountain Project has affected its organisation and diffusion in substantial ways. First off, the identification of the Dark Mountain Project with the concepts and imagery it has established means that the organisation and the narrative are in many ways inseparable for participants. The inherent ambiguity of the narrative of 'uncivilising' and the refusal to provide answers mean that participants have to find their own meanings within the wider narrative. This makes interactions within the Dark Mountain Project personal and unique: participants gradually find their own ways of making sense of the 'topography of collapse'. In this way, participants are encouraged to see Dark Mountain as a space to come to for certain kinds of inquiries and conversations. Second, the emphasis on improvisation and vernacular forms of life is directly reflected in the evolution of the Dark Mountain Project as an organisation. This can be seen both in the development of a broader team of organisers and in the spaces that Dark Mountain curates. With the broadening interest in the project it was possible to move from individual crowdfunding campaigns for the journal towards subscription-based publishing, and organisational roles developed in line with the organisational tasks and requirements insofar as resources and interests allowed. The festivals also evolved from being set up as a conference towards a gathering which relied on various people who self-organised stages and events. Third, a decisive factor in the wider diffusion of the Dark Mountain Project was its articulation of a narrative that was previously unavailable to participants and which connected with a wider story of change. The next chapter goes on to discuss this in more detail and conclude on the inquiry presented in these chapters.