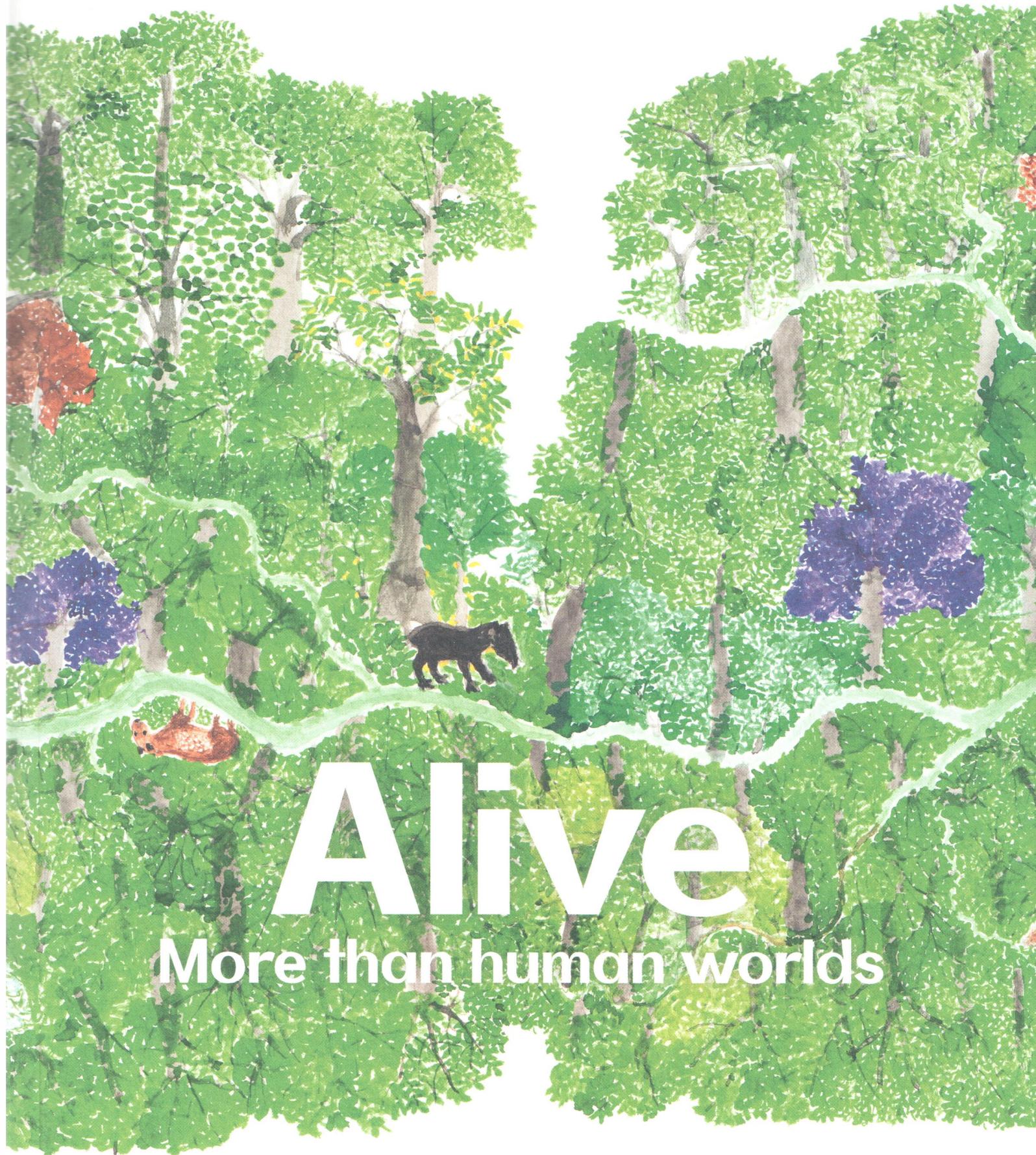


Museum der  
Kulturen Basel



# Alive

More than human worlds

HATJE  
CANTZ

# Of the unity of all beings

Kaspar Müller<sup>1</sup>

'Alive – more than human worlds', the title of the exhibition, fits Bruno Manser's thinking perfectly. To him, life meant not to reduce the world to human interests, but to understand different worlds as interconnected and undivided. He was convinced that every living being has 'its own personal history' that deserves respect. In this way, he addressed an issue that is common to many cosmologies – including that of the Penan as well as numerous indigenous communities across the Amazon lowlands and the African continent: entities and beings are animated, have a 'personal' identity. This awareness was also at the heart of Bruno's scepticism towards the belief that humans would be the crown of creation.

Bruno Manser's biography and experience of life were closely interwoven with the rain forest, with curiosity and a deep fascination for life at its roots. With his journey to *Borneo*, he fulfilled his childhood dream. He didn't originally travel to Sarawak with the intention of campaigning for the environment or for human rights, rather, he was in search of what he was longing and yearning for. It was only later that he found himself cast in the role of an activist. Some have claimed that he gave himself the air of a defender of the world; malicious voices even say that he played the part of a 'white saviour'. But that was not the case. "No, I don't see myself as a saviour", he wrote in his diary (Diary 12/614). Bruno was willing to offer support and actively did so but, above all, he did not want to remain silent. He writes on: "But, whatever happens, a sincere heart may bow to everything but to one thing: injustice – and this is what the Penan and their environment are experiencing" (ibid.). He was struggling against the injustice he witnessed in the rainforest of Borneo, an injustice that was destroying the Penan and their way of life along with their forest and livelihood simply out of greed for money. His initial curiosity turned into a task.

In his diaries, Bruno Manser shares his life and experiences among the Penan in Sarawak with us. When reading, you quickly get the impression that Bruno is addressing us directly. You can almost hear him explaining things to us, some of them meaningful and beautiful, others interesting or amusing, yet others deeply disturbing. And you can't help feeling that he sincerely wants us to understand why his life in the rainforest with his second family, the Penan, points the way to the roots of nature and everything natural.

Bruno was keen to document the life and culture of the Penan as best as possible, along with the local flora and fauna, although he modestly acknowledges: "My attempts at imitation are a shabby reflection of the real – but still better than nothing at all" (Diary 1/44). He was impressed by almost everything he saw: "Such a multitude of creation in colour and form, a diversity that goes far, far beyond anything human imagination could come up with" (ibid.). The two quotations express where he saw the boundaries of mankind: humans could ever only be part of this infinite creation, but never masters of the world.

To let us partake in his experiences, he relied on a wide range of methods and media: drawings, texts, lectures, photographs, public actions, to name but a few (fig. 9). In the process, he created a unique piece of cultural heritage and lent it tangible, material form. Apart from these manifest and well-documented facts and events, what I wish to learn is how living

with the Penan and with the forest influenced and shaped Bruno's understanding, knowledge and his inner being. But, is it at all possible to delve into his inner world? And if yes, are we allowed to do so, and what do we have to be mindful of? Caution and restraint are certainly required when we, as merely indirect bystanders, try to describe what another person feels and experiences. Bearing this in mind, I will try not only to trace the stages on Bruno's journey but also, with all due respect and care, explore his feelings. His diaries contain numerous clues that will serve as my guides.

In the industrialized West, in particular, people tend to regard themselves as being at the centre of the world and believe they not only have the power but also the right to determine how others should live. For Bruno, however, all beings and entities are interconnected, mutually affecting one another. Hence, he saw and understood himself merely as a part of an overarching whole. He was aware that humans only begin to grasp this whole because there are more than human worlds. He fully appreciated his dual role – on the one hand, observer, on the other, part of an encompassing whole – and gradually began to identify more deeply with his role as part of the whole.

It was not least this understanding that made him deeply feel that if we destroy a part of this whole – the rainforests, the oceans, the rivers – we are actually destroying ourselves. Thus, at a very early point in time, he addressed an issue that has become increasingly pressing in recent years: environmental destruction. Practically all current debates on climate hold that a strictly anthropocentric mode of thought and action will ultimately lead to loss and ruin. Albeit, not all humans are equally involved in driving the Anthropocene; powerful actors of the global economy and politics play here the lead role.

Bruno came very close to the earth. His being, his personality 're-connected' with the earth, to quote the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff who, in his book 'Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor', spoke about ecology and spirituality as "feeling, loving, and thinking as earth" (1997, 187). Bruno was no stranger to spiritual issues, and the subject comes up again and again in his diaries. Among other things, he was critical of the legacy of the missions: "The mission had radically uprooted the fetishism practised by the natives, had all amulets burnt and all taboos broken. The bible became the new talisman, which many of the nomads, although illiterate, always carry with them like a weighty burden." (Diary 14/988 f.) In this way, he writes, "valuable practices were lost, practices in which people listened to what nature had to say, and paid attention and respect to its existence and being." Notwithstanding, in the same diary entry, Bruno also finds positive aspects in the bible, for instance, when he describes it as a book that fosters altruism and points "the way out of the vicious circle of threats and counter-threats, leading to non-violence": "it is white magic that calls for a mystical consciousness of the oneness of all beings" (ibid.).

This 're-connecting' with the earth is the opposite of many paradigms held by Christianity and Judaism – religions that encourage, indeed legitimize, the use and exploitation of the earth, thus leading to its destruction. "God blessed them and said to them: Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea,

and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” (Genesis 1:28). Radically different were the life and culture of the Penan as Bruno experienced them: not interested in domination, but rather in reciprocity and dialogue.

His experiences made Bruno Manser realize that humans together with all the other beings – plants, animals, elements – can indeed form a unity, be one. He was curious, he could marvel, and one of his convictions was: “Be amazed at least once a day.” Bruno was capable of observing, thinking deeply, experiencing happiness and suffering and so, gradually, he learned that he was part of this loving earth. At the same time, he learned that what he observed and cherished, what he described and drew, were products of the human mind and perception, and, consequently, of the limited abilities of his sensory organs, but that there had to be more, something deeper. Is it something ‘divine’ or ‘mystical’? Human thought has its limitations, the earth is much more. Is this the purpose of sustainability: to understand and become one with the earth?

Bruno was convinced that “the mark of becoming a true human being is spiritualization; and yet, in this body with all its needs, we will time and again stumble over ‘Brother Donkey’ as Francis of Assisi liked to call it” (Diary 14/990). To him, it became increasingly clear that the spiritual cannot be separated from the worldly, material, and bodily dimensions. With one of his songs he invites us to “Throw off all the illusions and masks, let your soul arise true and naked, pure and clear – pure and clear like a rock crystal” (Diary 16/1).

We should never attempt to know everything about Bruno Manser, and certainly not instrumentalize his life. On the contrary, we must accept that we will never understand everything, but simply show respect towards his life and personality. Bruno gave us a lot with his drawings, writings, and actions, created a lasting legacy. What really went on in his inner being shall remain reserved to him and his soul.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the copy editor Claus Donau for his valuable suggestions.