

I experience as I experiment – I experiment as I experience

Experience and experimentality in artistic work and research

Ed. Denise Ziegler

Published by The Academy of Fine Arts at the University of
the Arts Helsinki

2019

Performing with a Pine Tree

ANNETTE ARLANDER

In my artistic research project “Performing with Plants” I have sought to combine my practice of creating rough time-lapse videos with a focus on trees. Prompted by posthumanist and new materialist debates I have asked questions, such as what can one do together with trees; how to perform together with trees for the camera on a tripod; how to appear in the same image space with trees. I have discussed the idea of appearing with trees and the emerging field of critical plant studies elsewhere (Arlander 2019 a, b). A few words about the wider context is perhaps needed to begin with.

By “posthumanist debates” I refer to the critique of the legacy of European humanism as summarized by Rosi Braidotti (2013) and others. They see that legacy as a tradition that separates the so-called civilized Western ‘man’ (male) from other forms of life, and denies such others, including plants, all agency and consciousness. Within the broad spectrum of new materialist thought, I have been particularly interested in the agential realism of physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad (2007), who continues and criticizes the work of Niels Bohr, as well as the ideas of thinkers

like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. In Barad's account, the differential boundaries between humans and nonhumans, culture and nature, science and the social, are constituted through causal intra-actions. Intra-action is her term for "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" which, unlike the common term of interaction, stresses the fact that "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (2007, 33). Different intra-actions produce different phenomena, and who or what are excluded through them matters, she notes (2007, 58). I have explored the idea of intra-action in the context of artistic research elsewhere (Arlander 2014). Here it might suffice to note that, in the context of the current climate crisis, it is ever more important to acknowledge our co-constitution with other life forms, including plants.

In this text, however, I want to indulge in speaking of my own work and the practical aspect of experimentation in it, although the experimental dimension is rather subdued in my fairly documentary and even diarist practice. I want to use this opportunity to try to articulate my standard work process and to extract possible moments of experimentation in it. It seems that experimentation is more foregrounded in the editing phase, although one could find some experimental aspects in the performing and recording phase, too, such as the possibility of chance occurrences entering the work. There is an experimental aspect in the installing phase as well, when I am trying out different solutions to find the one that would fit best the specific exhibition site or context. In this text I will nevertheless focus on a phase that is normally left invisible, namely editing, which is necessary in order to create the specific effect of time-lapse videos.

In some sense, experimentation is minimized in editing, as is the use of imagination. In another sense, there is a family relationship between my work process and experimentation: after I have made some initial decisions, such as setting up a framing for an image and an action to repeat, what happens next, during the repetition, remains open. Merleau-Ponty begins his short text

Eye and Mind by discussing science and the notion of gradient, which was fashionable at the time. "The gradient is a net we throw out to sea, without knowing what we will haul back in it. It is the slender twig upon which unforeseeable crystalizations [sic] will form." (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 1) My initial choices resemble such a net.

Experimentation is often understood as the foundational activity of scientific research. One interesting example of classical experimentation is Monica Gagliano's work with plant learning. For instance, she has conducted experiments which show that the plant *Mimosa pudica*, which is famous for reacting to touch by folding together its leaves, reacts not only through instinctive reflexes or a more or less automated habituation process, which is a simple form of learning, but it also actually makes decisions of a kind, when to close her leaves and when not. The experimental setup consisted of a machine that would suddenly drop mimosa plants and cause them to react by closing their leaves. After this was repeated for a while, the plants learned that the action was not dangerous and stopped folding their leaves. They could even remember what they had learned for several days. For a full description of the experiment, see Gagliano's book *Thus Spoke the Plant* (Gagliano 2018, 56–71).

In art, especially in performance art, there is another kind of experimentation, one that does not involve control groups or the need for others to repeat the same experiment. Often the main ingredient is possibility of the unknown, of an unexpected result. In classical endurance pieces, the performance is set up as a task, and the question is whether the artist is able to accomplish it or not, or how long he or she will last. The performance will end when the artist can no longer continue the action. In the early work of Abramovic and Ulay, for example, there were "no rehearsals, no repetitions and predicted endings"; they did not know beforehand what was going to happen, which made unedited video recordings of the performances crucial as documents. (Ulay/Abramovic 1997, 17).

This is quite different from the way I use video recordings. My videos are edited, and the editing produces an “artificial” action in the video, which is quite different from the real-life performances in front of the camera that is their material. Whereas experimentation in traditional performance art is about the experience (of enduring, risk, danger, pain and so on), in my practice experience and experimentation are linked in a different way. Because I use repetition as a tool – visiting the same trees repeatedly – I experience not only the trees and the shifting seasons in the environment together with them, which may include surprises, but also the act of repetition *as repetition*, both as a routine or duty and as a kind of comfort.

*

What about artistic research? The kind of experimentation I do – trial and error – is not usually considered research but rather part of the craft, the practice of doing, which of course involves lots of decision making. The works that are discussed below were created as part of an artistic research project called “Performing with Plants”, funded by the Swedish Research Council (which has a special committee for artistic research). The English abstract of the research proposal summarizes the aims as follows:

“Performing with plants” is an artistic research project aiming to investigate the question “how to perform landscape today?” A post-humanist perspective prompts us to rethink the notion of landscape, and to realize that the surrounding world consists of life forms and material phenomena with differing degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing landscape could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements, like singular trees, and explore what could be done together with them. The most important inquiries to be explored are: 1) How to collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants? 2) How to further develop experiences from previous attempts

at performing landscape? 3) How to create actions with plants, in which humans can be invited to participate? An overarching research topic is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the insights generated by post-humanist and new materialist research?

The aim of the project is to develop techniques generated during previous work by the applicant, i.e. the twelve-year project *Animal Years* (2002–2014), where focus was on showing changes in the landscape over time, rather than collaboration with the trees. By collaborating with plants more sensitively and ecologically, sustainable modes of performing can be developed, in order to serve as inspiration and provocation regarding ways of understanding our surrounding world. (Arlander 2016, 2)

As part of this project, I made repeated visits to a small wood in the centre of Stockholm, performing for a camera on tripod with spruce stumps and pine trees. The performances took place during the Chinese year of the dog, between 16 February 2018 and 3 February 2019, in Lill-Jansskogen (“Little Jan’s Wood”) between the campuses of the Royal Institute of Technology and Stockholm University. The area looks like a small forest, but is in fact part of a park, northern Djurgården. I visited four sites repeatedly, two spruce stumps and two pine trees, sometimes three times a week (100 times in all). The performances were recorded by a video camera on tripod and later edited into rough time-lapse videos. In all performances I wore a pale pink woollen scarf, and in three of them I had my back towards the camera, as I usually do, to make the human figure more impersonal. At the first site I sat on an old spruce stump with the felled trunk still attached to it, relatively close to the camera. At the second site I sat on a small spruce stump on the ground among tall spruce trees, this time further away from the camera. At the third site I first swung and then just hung from the branch of an old pine

tree, with the aim of exploring continuous movement (which I had previously explored by sitting in a swing). At the fourth site I sat in a small pine tree on the slope next to a path, almost hidden between its branches. Although my principal aim was to perform for the camera in order to produce time-lapse videos, I was inevitably performing for passers-by as well, because the wood is frequented quite often by people running, jogging and walking their dogs. Especially the dogs were interested in my unusual behaviour.

The purpose of these repeated attempts at performing, posing or appearing with trees was to explore how one might perform with plants while respecting their own sense of time, visiting them in their own place. Whether this can be called collaboration in a strict sense of the word is questionable, though, because the trees or stumps had no option but to collaborate. Through the act of repetition, however, a specific type of bonding occurred, which hints at the possibility of developing another kind of relationship with trees and with vegetation more generally.

The project is now nearing the end, although work continues with some of the articles written about it. The video installation in the exhibition is one of its main results or outputs, and I hope to show it in other exhibitions in the future. On another level, the work and its various versions also serve as research data, material for my written reflections on performing with plants on a more conceptual level. Although my own experience of the work is quite prosaic (“this is what I did and what you see is what you get”), even somewhat technical, I am aware and actually hope that the final result can have other dimensions for the viewer. On some level I hope to share with the viewers something of the experience of hanging or swinging from a pine tree repeatedly for a year. On another level, however, I realize that the compressed and edited versions create an illusion or an impression of a completely different kind of action, and that the experience of it will vary depending on the viewer’s own previous experiences of hanging, swinging, pine trees or trees more generally. There is

no need for the viewer to know about my personal experiences during the making of the video. In this context a more detailed discussion of the actual working method might nevertheless be appropriate.

*

In this working method I make one decision at a time, and leave all the other options open. But once the first decision is made, it is fixed. This might seem obvious in many mediums, but digital video makes other options possible, including almost endless postproduction. Experimentation in this case is not about something unknown, but about trying things out, experimenting with variations. All the variations are also created in practice, rather than being planned and chosen in advance based on thought experiments. There is an element of the unknown, but that emerges from the environment, from shifting circumstances that bring surprises.

Whereas traditional cinema – which many artists working with moving image media today want to engage with – mostly begins with a script (or synopsis and treatment or the like, I am not familiar with the exact terminology) which is then used as a basis for filming and also editing, my work has no script. However, I am not “improvising” with the camera, either, gathering material and then creating a structure in the editing room. My method is very simple and fairly systematic. Although I sometimes employ other strategies, the following is my standard procedure for making rough time-lapse videos.

In the first stage, I choose the site and the partner, such as the pine tree, and an action or position to repeat with it. Then I choose the place for the camera and the framing that I try to maintain throughout the repetitions. I fix the framing and my position, while leaving the duration fairly open, although I do count my breaths to keep track of time. Sometimes I also choose a time schedule, such as approximately three times a week, as in this case. And then I do the repetitions. Choosing the site or a part-

ner, choosing a framing, choosing a position or action, is almost like creating an experimental setup. Variation in the images is the result of chance occurrences or seasonal changes during the repetitions. Some of the changes could be anticipated, others not. There are also mistakes, like when in the beginning of this particular case I experimented with different white balance settings manually, or accidentally changed the frame rate in the middle of the process, or made simple shifts in the framing, if the landmarks were not clear enough.

There have been times when I enjoyed a more hazardous process in creating an image, such as not checking my position within the frame in advance, thereby playing with the uncertainty of what the final image would look like. But after some crazy experiences – like when I sat next to a geyser waiting for it to erupt only to find out that I had placed myself outside the frame – I have begun to check the image more carefully. I adjust the camera, enter the image, and then return and play it back to see what it looks like, before beginning the actual performance. The automatic functions of the camera sometimes produce strange results, as when the lighting conditions change abruptly, but using them also gives the camera more agency. Ideally, once the initial choices are made, the “experimental set up” stays the same, and the changing environmental circumstances are then recorded without any unnecessary human interference.

The second stage, editing, is more interesting in terms of experimentation, and it is here that the “added value” or “magic” is created. A new action appears that takes place in the image space – like hanging from a pine for a year, or sitting immobile on a spruce stump through the passing seasons – something that did not occur in real life in front of the camera. When I edit a piece, I make copies of all the footage in the order it was recorded, keeping the original chronology, and I also use all sessions, disregarding none. Then I cut out the preparations, like entering and exiting the frame, in order to create the impression of a continuous action or pose; I also separate the various actions, such

as the swinging and the hanging in the case under discussion. Sometimes I also separate the “empty” views, like the pine tree without the human performer. Although the order of the clips is fixed – I follow the chronology of the recordings – I experiment with different clip durations, and often I create several alternatives. There are also other details to consider, such as the duration of crossfades between clips – or the choice of using crossfades in the first place, because crossfades have been “forbidden” in much moving image work for some time. I mostly use a standard one-second crossfade to smooth the sound over the cut and facilitate synchronization between parallel videos. A colleague once commented on a raw edit of the swinging version, saying that the double movement was disturbing – the bodily movement and the movement from one image to the next through the crossfade. That made me reconsider my choice and try slightly shorter crossfades.

Usually I edit a maximum length version of each sequence of actions, in this case following the movement of hanging or swinging from the tree. I then edit synchronized versions of all these sequences, adjusting the clip length according to the shortest one. With the static poses, I often edit versions with a fixed clip length, showing perhaps one minute or ten seconds of each session. With an action like hanging or swinging, the duration must follow the movement. Preferably I make several different versions, leaving the possibility open to choose the final duration of the work according to context: shorter versions of less than 20 minutes for academic presentations, longer ones for installation display (anything up to an hour and more), and a duration for screenings, preferably less than ten or sometimes even five minutes. There is also the option of adding a voiceover, to create an essay of sorts, something I explored in Amsterdam in March 2019 with the work “Hanging in a Pine – with text”. Usually I start to make combinations only after the various durations are edited, either for multi-channel installations or more recently also for split screen videos, testing various combinations and

positions, synchronised or not. I can choose to synchronize the videos or to keep only the same total duration without synchronizing the clips; this was the case when combining the swinging and hanging videos.

With multi-channel installations and especially with split-screen videos, another interesting aspect in addition to duration and synchronization is the placement of the channels. In the case of multi-channel installations, the placement can be left open, to be decided at the exhibition venue, but for split-screen versions the channels need to be fixed. For example, when thinking of how to combine the swinging and the hanging version in an installation, my initial impulse was to begin with the hanging images on the left and place the stronger movement of swinging to the right. When I saw the test edits in two adjacent monitors, I immediately realized it made more sense to begin with the swinging on the left and continue with the hanging on the right, to move towards stillness, which gave more space and prominence to the relatively static performance of the pine. I also realized that it was not necessary to synchronize the duration of the images. The continuous variation of combinations was actually more interesting. It added an element of unpredictability to the work, as long as the seasons were more or less compatible, with the total duration of both videos being the same.

In this case, the experimentation began in earnest when I was combining the videos, trying out all the available options: hanging & swinging, swinging & hanging, tree & hanging, hanging & tree, swinging & tree, tree & swinging, hanging & tree & swinging, as well as swinging & tree & hanging. The durations vary from 19 min 31 sec in “Hanging in a Pine – with text” to 70 min 47 sec in “With a Pine”, while the versions combined into diptychs and triptychs have a fixed duration, 15 min 28 sec:

“Swinging – With a Pine” (includes Swinging in a Pine, With a Pine)

“With a Pine – Hanging” (includes With a Pine, Hanging in a Pine)

“Swinging – Hanging in a Pine” (includes Swinging in a Pine, Hanging in a Pine)

“Swinging – With a Pine – Hanging” (includes Swinging in a Pine, With a Pine, Hanging in a Pine)

With this method, I rarely decide “this is the work” but produce several variations instead. Often, however, it becomes clear over time – one might say, with experience – that one version is the “best” one, the “real” one. At the time of this writing, I do not know which of these alternatives will be on display at the Exhibition Laboratory until at Christmas 2019, although I think I would prefer the last one.

But what about experience and experimentation? Do I experience as I experiment, or do I experiment as I experience? Of course, I do. There is no way I could do anything without experiencing it in some sense.

On the one hand, experience is important. One of the main reasons for wanting to perform with plants or collaborate with trees is the possibility to spend time with them, to experience them, and to experience the world together with them. While not perhaps being the primary point of the finished work, although I suppose it is somehow visible, it is an important dimension of the practice. Often, I forget to think of the image, focusing instead on the actual practice of visiting the tree, the experience of the repetition and the small (or sometimes large) changes in the environment as the main aspect of the work. Although I check that something has been recorded, I rarely look at the footage during the year, only afterwards. Sometimes I do wish that I had focused less on the experience of visiting the tree and more on the actual images produced.

On the other hand, experience is perhaps too important. I do work fairly systematically, trying to minimize the use of experience as a tool, although I am unable to abandon all aesthetic

choices; and they are, after all, based on experience. The framing, for example, will stay the same, even if the light might be much more beautiful with a small shift, and so on. The final aesthetic decisions made in the editing room (or when the work is installed) are based not only on rules but on experience, my perceptions and preconceptions, and in that sense, they are arbitrary, or habitual, based on conventions. Thus, although I would prefer to think that my work is based on experimentation rather than experience, I guess experience rules.

References

- Arlander, Annette. 2019 a. "Performing with Plants – Appearing with Elms and Alder". In Mika Elo, Lea Kantonen and Petri Kaverma (eds.) *Etappeja – Kuvataideakatemian tohtoriohjelman 20 vuotta / Waypoints – The Doctoral Programme at Academy of Fine Arts 20 Years*. pp. 33–56.
- Arlander, Annette. 2019 b. "Resting with Pines in Nida – attempts at performing with plants", *Performance Philosophy* Vol 4, no 2 (2019):452–475
<http://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/232>
- Arlander, Annette. "Performing with Plants" (project website) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>
- Arlander, Annette. 2016. Application 2016 00998. (available on project website)
- Arlander, Annette. 2014. "From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape". *Artnodes*. No. 14, pp. 26–34.
<http://www.raco.cat/index.php/Artnodes/article/viewFile/303309/392962>
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Oxford, UK: Polity Press.
- Gagliano, Monica. 2018. *Thus Spoke the Plant*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Eye and Mind* http://www.biologuagem.com/ling_cog_cult/merleauponty_1964_eyeandmind.pdf
- Ulay/Abramovic' 1997. *Performances 1976–1988*. Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven.