



# PERFORMING AND THINKING WITH TREES

ANNETTE ARLANDER



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“The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is – it’s to imagine what is *possible*.”

– *bell hooks*

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## Preface

This collection of ponderings related to performing with trees is based on my experiences during the artistic research project *Performing with Plants* and is inevitably also influenced by the ensuing project, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, still underway at the time of this writing. As is common in the context of artistic research, the project and the works described herein were created by the author. A first-person perspective is an important feature of much artistic research, which is here further accentuated by the fact that the artist-researcher also functions as the performer. Writing in first person singular “I”, rather than the academic “we” or a neutralized passive voice, might give the impression of wanting to emphasize a subjective interpretation or an explicitly personal account, or to engage in artistic self-absorption, even when that is not the case. In the following, I will nevertheless use that style of writing, honoring the feminist legacy of criticizing the illusion of the objective or detached and supposedly universal perspective and endorse the partial perspective of being entangled, embedded and enmeshed *in* and *with* a site and situation.

These essays deal with the various strategies explored during *Performing with Plants* (2017–2019), undertaken as a visiting researcher at the Academy of Fine Arts while funded by Kone Foundation and hosted by the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2017) and by Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research Council) while hosted by Stockholm University of the Arts (2018–2019). Some peer-reviewed articles<sup>1</sup> related to the project have been published, and a photobook with still images from the main video works called *Att Uppträda med Träd – Performing with Trees* was published by Stockholm University of the Arts as an artistic output. The 16th

1 Arlander 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021

issue of *Ruukku – Studies in Artistic Research* on the theme “working with the vegetal”, was a more indirect result. A formal report is attached to the online archive of the project.<sup>2</sup> The publication at hand, *Performing and Thinking with Trees* is thus not a research report but aims to explore issues based on experiences gained through the project and explore more recent work through a more essayistic way of writing. The publication nevertheless shares the research results by focusing on and discussing the various strategies of lens-based work used during the project, such as time-lapse videos with specific trees for a year or a day, interpreting the Celtic tree calendar in city parks in Helsinki and Stockholm, daily routines like photographing the bark of trees and the use of social media such as Instagram, Flickr or Tumblr for distributing distinct projects. These practical strategies are combined with a presentation of some philosophical discussions related to vegetal life by Elaine Miller (2002), Michael Marder (2013, 2015 and more) and Emanuele Coccia (2019), among others. These considerations are also influenced by and include examples from the follow-up project, which in some sense is the major result of the previous project, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.<sup>3</sup> These texts seek to contribute in a modest way to the emerging field of critical plant studies as well as demonstrate what the outputs of artistic research beyond doctoral degree works could be.

The text is structured in three parts, following a somewhat unusual order. The introduction describes the plans and delineates the context. The second part, *Performing with Trees*, describes the practices, various methods and strategies employed. The third part,

2 See list of “Published project outcomes” on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/709778>

3 See project blog <https://meetingswithtrees.com>

*Thinking with Trees*, discusses some theoretical approaches. This order emphasizes the practice-based nature of these reflections. Despite the report-like style – “I did this and then I did this...” – I hope these accounts will serve as examples of possible strategies and stimulate the reader to undertake further experiments.

## Acknowledgments

To begin with, I would like to acknowledge the institutions that have supported me in this endeavor, namely the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, Kone Foundation, Stockholms Konstnärliga Högskola, the Committee for Artistic Research of Vetenskapsrådet, the Swedish Research Council, the Finnish Cultural Foundation, and the Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki. I also would like to express my gratitude to the various residency facilities I was hosted by, which greatly influenced this work, beginning with the Arts Research Africa residency at Wits University in Johannesburg, where my stay included a visit to the Nirox sculpture park; the Mustarinda community; the Öres residency; the Päiväkoti residency in Hailuoto; the Ars BioArctica residency in Kilpisjärvi; and Eckerö Post and Customs House in the Åland Islands. The people and trees I collaborated with in these places and elsewhere are too numerous to list, but I express my gratitude to all of you, so thank you!



*Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) video still

# I Introduction

The title “Performing and Thinking with Trees” is, on the one hand, challenging and perhaps even provocative, because in everyday parlance we do not usually speak of plants as either performing or capable of thought. The idea of performing can perhaps more easily be extended to plants: if electrons can perform as either waves or particles, depending on the experimental apparatus, as Karen Barad has suggested,<sup>4</sup> plants can probably perform in their manner too, as has been claimed most recently in the context of performance philosophy.<sup>5</sup> To speak of plants as thinking is probably more controversial, because it touches on the heated debate of plant intelligence. Based on contemporary research, however, it seems that plants do think, or at least they learn and engage in many types of decision-making.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the title is challenging because of the preposition “with”; what does it mean to perform or think *with* somebody else, especially somebody so different from ourselves? How do I perform and think to begin with, and how do I do it with plants? Or, if we follow philosophers like Michael Marder and Emanuele Coccia, how did I come to think that I could perform and think without doing it with plants?

4 Barad 2014, 180.

5 Gibson & Sandilands, 2021.

6 Gagliano 2017a.

In the following texts, I refer to some philosophical discussions related to plants, well aware that my knowledge in philosophy is rudimentary; I read and respond to those conversations and debates as an artist. My contributions concern experiences and practices, rather than the conceptual underpinnings of our relationship to plants. Although I can contribute to the debate mainly through practical examples, I am aware that my endeavor is based on some basic assumptions. For example, I assume as my starting point that the concept of performance has been expanded from conventional preconceptions – perhaps involving performers and spectators, maybe even something like a stage – to encompass actions and processes taking place in the world. And, in a similar manner, our understanding of thinking has been expanded beyond our conventional preconceptions concerning propositional logic and the traditions of Western philosophy to encompass other modes of rational and relational attempts at making decisions in and sense of the world.

That said, I have to confess right off that I am not endowed with any special sensitivity in regard to plants, nor with any specific skills and experiences in working with them in terms of gardening, for example. My starting point is that of a city girl who belongs to the generation that was supposed to collect an herbarium as a child and thus developed some interest in plants, including their medicinal uses, at least in theory. For me as a child, they had the strange allure of witchcraft and fairy tales, though it was soon forgotten. My return to plants happened not through ecological concerns, “forest bathing” or bio art – all contemporary contributions to the growing interest in plants – but through an interest in landscape. Working with landscapes and recording their changes on video brought me to look at the individual elements that make up a landscape and produce changes within it, and I soon realized the importance of vegetation, especially trees.

As mentioned in the preface, this text is divided into two main parts, besides this introduction. The second main part, *Performing with Trees*, is devoted to the various strategies for performing with plants and trees that I have used during the project, including precedents established in previous projects and new methods developed afterwards in others. These strategies include various scheduled activities, such as year-long time-lapse videos and day-long time-lapse videos; single longer meetings with trees; attempts at various actions such as swinging, hanging, holding on to, lying next to, reaching up to and even writing to trees; experiments with various distances from the camera; and some experiments with recording bark and other similarly exploratory attempts. Various experiments with costume and with the framing of the image are also discussed. An important topic is the relationship to and various ways of using text. Through examples, I describe some individual trees, as well as the sites where they are growing, although my main focus is on the methods, which I hope might be of interest to others wishing to engage with trees. In cases where I met a tree only once during my travels, I rely on my blog posts to support my memory. Regarding trees I met regularly for a longer period, either a year or a day, I use material I wrote during the process. I also describe the various channels or tools for distribution I used, both in terms of single-channel or multi-channel video installations and in terms of social media platforms. I have experimented with regular habits such as: “year one with plants” (years two and three as well); the images of bark and later lichen on bark, uploaded to an account devoted only to those images; experiments with a dried grenadine and a pinecone; and brief video clips of meetings with trees. The documentations on the Research Catalogue form one important channel, perhaps the most important platform for sharing material.



The third part, *Thinking with Trees*, is devoted to discussion of problems on a more general level, such as the situated knowledge of plants and plants as producers of space and growing beings. The question of plants performing and the related problem of who or what can perform, as well as the controversial issue of plants' ability to think are also taken up. The question of performing "with" plants, of breathing or appearing with plants, is touched on as well. Many intriguing topics, such as vegetal temporality, decolonization of our relationship with nature, plants as artists themselves, ethical challenges when performing with plants and what thinking with trees as a way of learning from them might mean, are discussed only briefly or merely hinted at.

To help the reader understand the starting point for *Performing with Plants*, I begin by briefly describing its background, a project called *Performing Landscape*, comprising twelve one-year performances for camera, entitled *Animal Years* (2003–2014). These were videos recorded on Harakka Island off the coast of Helsinki and are based on the Chinese calendar and its twelve-year cycle, with each year named after a specific animal, beginning in the year of the horse (2002) and ending in another year of the horse (2014). The key question explored was how to perform landscape today. The main purpose was to call attention to changes in the landscape caused by the shifting seasons, weather and climate, to focus on the environment and document its changes. Thus, returning to exactly the same spot was important. While performing a still-act or simple action in front of a video camera, the events taking place in the background – the landscape – can come to the forefront. By repeating a performance at regular intervals over relatively long periods of time and then condensing the material through editing, the slow happenings not discernible in real time become visible. Thus, the project produced "mementos" of what the landscape

looked like on the north coast of the Baltic Sea at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Over the years, the aim of *Animal Years* shifted more and more into making visible the passing of time, which initially was a side-effect of the work.<sup>7</sup> The project focused on seasonal changes resulting from the cyclical nature of our planetary time, based on the movement of Earth around the Sun and along its own axis. On another level, it was a response to the logic of a cyclic video loop in an installation context rather than the progressive storyline of a film, for instance. Performances for a static tripod-mounted camera, repeated once a week for a year in the same place with the same framing of the image and then condensed through editing to form short videos or multichannel installations, show time passing in the landscape by keeping space, place and framing constant. Repetition was used to generate material with variations that could then be put together chronologically, using all the "slices of time" in the order they were created. The shifting conditions or various accidental occurrences produced changes around the basic structure of a few initial choices.

The question of how to perform landscape today led me to explore performing with individual elements in the landscape and soon evolved into an interest in engaging with vegetation, as exemplified in the texts "Performing with Trees"<sup>8</sup> and "Becoming Juniper".<sup>9</sup> The compelling question now was: "How does one perform

7 In "Performing Landscape for Years" (Arlander 2014), I discuss the project with regard to various conceptions of time. For a more detailed description of the various years, see Arlander 2018g.

8 See "Performing with Trees: Landscape and Artistic Research" (Arlander 2010).

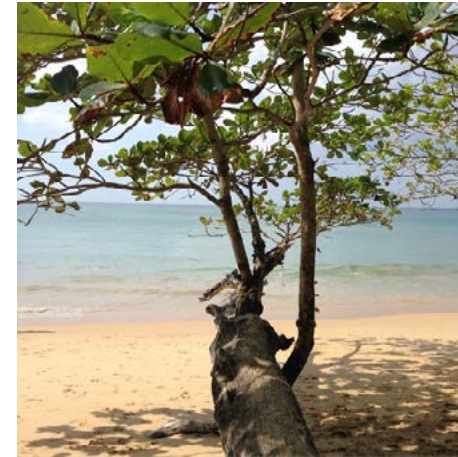
9 See "Becoming Juniper – Performing landscape as artistic research" (Arlander 2015). <https://nivel.teak.fi/becoming-juniper/becoming-juniper-performing-landscape-as-artistic-research-annette-arlander/>

with plants?” This became the main concern of *Performing with Plants* – how to perform and cooperate with plants and especially trees in relation to working with the vegetal in various types of performances.<sup>10</sup> The project developed and further honed the question of how to perform landscape today, which I had previously engaged with in *Animal Years*, by focusing on performing with trees while using the same techniques. Understanding our relationship in and as part of the environment has changed dramatically due to the climate crises and other disasters, such as the rapid loss of biodiversity, and thus demands new approaches. Merely looking at the landscape no longer seemed sufficient. A post-humanist and new-materialist perspective<sup>11</sup> demands that we consider how the surrounding world consists of creatures, lifeforms and material phenomena that we depend on and constantly interact with. What forms of action, of performance, are relevant in such a situation? I decided to approach individual elements in a landscape – specific plants or trees – and explore what I could do with them; for instance, how to perform for the camera together and what this “performing with” might mean.

10 See, for example, Battista 2012; Kramer 2012; Arlander 2014b, 2015; Nikolić and Radulovic 2018.

11 For example, Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013.

## Performing with Plants



Performing with Plants “logo”

*Performing with Plants* was realized in two parts: first, one year as a postdoctoral fellow in artistic research (more than fifteen years after my actual post-doctoral period) at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at Helsinki University, funded by Kone foundation; and then two years at Stockholm University of the Arts, funded by the Swedish Research Council’s Committee for Artistic Research. The research plan was originally written in Swedish. The following account is based on the briefer English version, written for the Helsinki Collegium and expanded with material from the Swedish one. At the time the research plan was written, I was relatively unaware of the burgeoning development of critical plant studies, and I will return to that context later. I was focused on rethinking our relationship to the environment as a central task for artistic research, which could contribute through its capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. My aim was to a) participate in the discussion by way of developing artistic practices and producing artworks that could critically question current conventions and

habits in our relationship to the environment and b) theoretically reflect, based on practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees. The English abstract from the plan summarizes the project 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 the focus was the change in the landscape over time, rather than collaboration with 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.

Considering the significance of the project for, and its links to, the wider artistic and scientific discussion, I emphasized that the question of how to perform landscape today – which *Performing with Plants* develops and refines – is not a rhetorical question. Our relationship to the environment has changed dramatically due to global warming and other more-or-less manmade disasters – a change that demands new approaches. A post-humanist perspective requests that we reconsider our understanding of landscape and realize that what we call the environment actually consists of beings and lifeforms with various degrees of agency. How does one perform, realize or activate a landscape understood in this manner? In this project, the aim was to approach individual parts of a landscape, such as specific trees, and explore working with them, for instance performing for the camera, together.

To investigate ways of collaborating with other beings we share this planet with is a central task for artists today. It is necessary to find ways to relate to the environment and the surrounding world that are meaningful and relevant from the perspectives of the ecological crisis and a new-materialist and post-humanist understanding of our place in the world. Artistic research can contribute to this development by allowing for and generating hybrid forms of performing and thinking. This project sought to participate in the discussion by way of, on the one hand, developing artistic practices and producing artworks that critically question existing conventions and habits in our relationship to the environment, and, on the other hand, by theoretically reflecting, based on this practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees. The value of the project rests ultimately on the importance of the plants themselves, I suggest, because plants produce the preconditions for oxygen-based life on our planet.

By using basic video technology and simple forms of repetition, by presenting the resulting video works within the frame of contemporary art and by considering the specific form of materiality that the landscape in general and individual trees in particular offer, the project developed practices that could present alternatives to existing ways of working and conventional modes of video and performance production. The project tried to relate to the current debate on socially engaged or participatory art by focusing on landscape and the site or environment as something to perform with, experience, appreciate and return to; by performing in public parks and by organizing small-scale performance events where spectators were invited to join in as participants; and by creating possibilities for comments and conversation (through a blog, a media archive and discussions).

Performing with Plants claimed to be relevant to the field of artistic research through its character of an investigative and interdisciplinary artistic practice and through its location at the border between performance art, media art and environmental art, at the intersection of performative and mediated or medial practices. Its relevance derived partly from this hybrid character; the results of the project were addressed to an art audience as well as an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary academic public within performance studies, performance as research, performance philosophy and artistic research, or art research more broadly. The importance of the overall research topic – how to collaborate with non-human entities like plants and especially trees – communicates on an interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary level while growing out of an artistic practice without instrumentalizing it.

Within fine art and stage arts, landscape is linked to a tradition of expressing human emotions and moods by projecting them onto the environment, thus anthropomorphizing landscape as an expression

of inner experiences. Classical examples include romantic landscape painting (with C. D. Friedrich as the most well-known example) or poetic descriptions of landscape (with Shakespeare's *King Lear* on the moor as a case in point). With the advent of modernism, this traditional understanding of landscape came to be questioned and criticized as romantic, colonial, anachronistic and incompatible with a contemporary (post-)conceptual view of art.<sup>12</sup> Today, this modernist critique itself can be considered outdated, because we can no longer draw an easy dividing line between nature and culture, between the human being and her environment or other creatures she shares this planet with. Discussions concerning the notion of landscape, and whether it is at all useful within contemporary art, have taken place within art theory,<sup>13</sup> its many meanings debated within geography<sup>14</sup> and even supported within feminist theory.<sup>15</sup> In the realm of theater and performance, landscape has mostly been linked to drama,<sup>16</sup> site-specificity<sup>17</sup> and eco-performance.<sup>18</sup> In film, an interesting discussion concerns eco-cinema.<sup>19</sup> Within artistic research in visual art, the notion of landscape has been critically scrutinized as well.<sup>20</sup> This focus on the notion of landscape, however, which was important in the planning stages of the project as a continuation of my previous work, soon declined in importance and gave way to other concepts.

12 Andrews 1999.

13 DeLue & Elkins 2008.

14 Wylie 2007.

15 Casid 2011.

16 Fuchs & Chaudhuri 2002.

17 Kaye 2000; Hill & Paris 2006; Pearson 2010.

18 Giannachi & Stewart 2005; Kershaw 2007; Arons & May 2012.

19 Rust & Monani 2013.

20 For example, Leiderstam 2006, Sand 2008 and many others.

Theoretically, the project is connected to post-humanist and new-materialist discussions concerning the vitality of matter and the limits of animistic approaches to the natural elements. To expel certain parts of existence to serve as landscape, as an environment or as a backdrop to humans is no longer automatically acceptable. Since we are surrounded by more or less living entities or things who have a kind of subjectivity<sup>21</sup> or a form of agency – “thingpower”<sup>22</sup> – we must approach notions like environment, surroundings and landscape differently. This project aimed to begin with and to practically explore whether notions like “natureculture”,<sup>23</sup> “intra-action”, “material-discursive practices”,<sup>24</sup> *zoe*<sup>25</sup> and “vegetal democracy”<sup>26</sup> could be helpful in articulating attempts at collaborating with parts of the environment (for instance, individual trees).

Methodologically, the project took as its starting point the theoretical discussions within artistic research<sup>27</sup> and creative arts research,<sup>28</sup> as well as performance as research.<sup>29</sup> The most important methods for knowledge production and for knowledge transfer were based on artistic practice. The project had a kinship with auto-ethnographic work, however, since the experiences of the artist-researcher herself provided central data for the research. It had some affinities with an adapted form of action research via a cyclic structure, in which planning, action and performance, presentation, reflection, revised planning and so on alternated. My aim was to use

21 Abram 2010.

22 Bennett 2010.

23 Haraway 2003.

24 Barad 2007.

25 Braidotti 2013.

26 Marder 2013.

27 Borgdorff 2012; Schwab 2015; Biggs & Karlsson 2011.

28 Barrett & Bolt 2010, 2014.

29 Allegue & al. 2009; Riley & Hunter 2009; Freeman 2010; Nelson 2013.

and refine the techniques I developed during previous works and to continue on the basis formed by the twelve-year project *Animal Years* (2002–2014), as well as the ongoing series *Trees Talk* (2003–) using this material as preliminary sketches for the project.

Artistically, the project could be positioned at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and media art (or video art, if we can speak of that today), with a particular emphasis on the legacy of Fluxus,<sup>30</sup> especially with regard to the attitude and use of so-called event scores. There is a long tradition of combining landscape and the female body in performance art, with Ana Mendieta and her *Siluetas series* (1973–1980) as perhaps the most well-known example. Marilyn Arsem or Essi Kausalainen, who have collaborated with plants, can be mentioned as contemporary examples. Within dance, artists like Eeo Stubbefield, together with Anna Halprin, or Paula Kramer, have investigated the relationship between body and landscape. In photography, Susanna Majuri and Elina Brotherus have placed themselves in the landscape. Within fine art, trees have served as material for Robert Smithson, Giuseppe Penone and Philippa Lawrence, who wraps trees in felt; and trees have served as collaborators to, for instance, Tuula Närhinen, who made trees draw or paint with light by attaching lamps to their branches and photographing the results. Terike Haapoja created installations in which the breathing of plants was transformed into sound (Venice Biennale 2014), and Eija-Liisa Ahtila created a video portrait of a spruce, “Horizontal” (2011), to show how our representational system is built to depict humans. These are examples of a broad field. Rather than making plants understandable to humans by way of technology, by sonification of biological processes (as, for example, Marcus Maerder has done with “sonified” trees) or by work-

30 Friedman 1990; Dezeuse 2002; Robinson 2002; Higgins 2002.

ing directly with biological processes within the tradition of bio art, where living tissue or bacteria serve as materials, my aim with this project was to explore everyday forms of embodied collaboration.

Performing with Plants could be positioned within artistic cross-boundary projects as well, since it was concerned with both performative and mediated practices. The project explored the intersection of the performative and the mediated or digital in practice, on the one hand, by combining performances for camera and live performance, video works and projections. On the other hand, these notions were to be used as analytical tools to describe the practice. The performative was understood in Butler's sense of productive repetition<sup>31</sup> and in Austin's sense of efficacy.<sup>32</sup> The mediated was understood in terms of media, video or performance in relation to the mediated and remediated<sup>33</sup> and as the challenge posed by social media to think of new forms of production and distribution. A relevant intersection for this type of cross-boundary work appears in the encounter of artforms and traditions: performance art and its emphasis on embodied presence in the here and now with spectators or witnesses and the way video and media art value repetition and transformation and a critical reflection on technology, as well as the manner in which environmental art stresses sensitivity to natural phenomena and the possible effects and side-effects an artwork can have.

A large part of contemporary art uses video as a tool to present to an art audience the various projects that have taken place elsewhere. My project joined this trend but also sought to explore the possibilities of employing current technology in order to develop

31 Butler 1993.

32 Austin 1962.

33 Bolter & Grusin 2000.

performance practices for the camera to which the audience could be invited to participate on site. The project thus aimed to relate to discussions concerning participation, relationally oriented practices and inclusive forms of artistic practice, where encounters, conversations, collaboration and ethical negotiations are central. In actual practice, the experiments with audience participation were limited to a few initial attempts, and the main focus soon turned to repeated performances for the camera and the creation of video works.

As mentioned above, the project explored how to perform or cooperate with plants and especially trees in order to develop and specify the question of how to perform landscape today, focusing on the possibility to approach individual elements in a landscape, such as specific trees, and see what could be done with them, how to perform together for the camera. The main purpose of the project was to experiment with such possibilities in practice and to investigate how performing with trees and other plants could become a mode of working with our surroundings while attuned to a post-humanist and (new-) materialist view of the environment. By focusing on individual elements of the landscape, particularly plants – which we have a chemically symbiotic relationship with: they produce the oxygen we need and use the carbon dioxide we produce – the project tried to develop more sensitive and ecologically sustainable modes of performing landscape. And the methods, artworks and events generated were thought to serve as inspiration and provocation for other modes of experiencing and appreciating our shared world.

As part of the research plan, I also looked at what could be considered preliminary results and realized that trees and plants often served as collaborators in some form, although they rarely had the main role in my previous works and articles. In works related to performing with plants, there are at least four categories. First, plants and trees have had an important role in my video works, although

the main focus has been on depicting time passing.<sup>34</sup> Second, some attempts at creating co-performances involving trees, where spectators can participate and a video is projected onto the site of its making, have been promising.<sup>35</sup> Third, the series of sound works *Trees Talk*, consisting of short, site-specific audio plays (monologues written, performed and recorded by me), is another type of cooperation with trees.<sup>36</sup> And, fourth, in some articles I describe and discuss works in which trees or plants have played an important role. In particular, the following texts are preliminary results of sorts: “Working with a Witches Broom – Att arbeta med en markvast” (2015),

34 Some examples of video works where trees have played a part: *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along (mix)* 2014 (3 min. 30 sec.) HD 16:9 <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-the-snake-swinging-along-mix/>, *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper* 2012 (20 min. 10 sec.) HD 16:9 <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-rabbit-with-a-juniper/>, *Holding Hands with Junipers – Ibiza* 2012 (15 min. 6 sec.) HD 16:9 <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/holding-hands-with-junipers-ibiza/>, *Under the Spruce I-III* 2008 three-channel video installation DV 4:3 (28 min.) <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/under-the-spruce-i-iii/>, *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* 2007 (8 min. 10 sec.) DV 4:3 <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-istun-puussa/>, *Day and Night of the Dog* 2007 (4 min.) DV 4:3 <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuorokausi/>, *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar* 2007 (4 min. 10 sec.) DV 4:3 <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-kalvolassa-kalenteri/>

35 Some examples of co-performances with projections, documented on Vimeo: *Swinging in Moonlight (mini)* 9.8.2014. <https://vimeo.com/103242549> *Swinging Together* 29.8.2015. <https://vimeo.com/137770819>

36 The series *Trees Talk* is documented on the Research Catalogue: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=62946>  
So far it consists of the following works (the earlier ones in Finnish only): *Puut Puhuvat* [Trees Talk]. (5 x 4–6 min.) Harakka Island 3.7.–14.9.2003. *Puut puhuvat* [Trees Talk] (5 x 4 min.) Minna’s Park, ANTI – Contemporary Art Festival, Kuopio 16.–19.9.2004. *Pajun puhetta* [Willow talk]. (5 min.) Töölö, Helsinki 25.–29.4.2006. *Omenapuu* [Apple Tree] (30 min.) Hiidentie/Taiteen tiet, Salo 5.6.–6.9.2008. *Oraiphilajan varjossa – I Skuggan av Hagtornen – In the Shadow of the Hawthorn* (4 x 5 min.) Living Room 306, 4 km<sup>2</sup> – festival in Turku 2.–5.6.2010. *The Hazel (Pähkinä – Nöt – Nut)*. Trilingual monologue (fin, sve, eng) (11–12 min.) Hidden Art environmental exhibition in Pori, Finland 13.5.–31.8.2016 at the location N61°29.515,E021°48.001.

which references Michael Marder’s ideas of plants’ capability for thought; “Becoming Juniper – Performing Landscape as Artistic Research” (2015), in which I describe the experience of trying to cooperate with a plant; and “Performing with Trees – Landscape and Artistic Research” (2010), which presents some previous experiments. The book *Performing Landscape: Notes on Site-specific Work and Artistic Research – Texts 2001–2011* (2012) provides a more general background to the problem of performing landscape.

To illustrate the aims of the project, I used an extensive quote from Michael Marder, which I returned to discuss later, in an article called “Resting with Pines in Nida”<sup>37</sup>:

“What would it mean for a performance, or for another artistic practice, to strive like a plant in all directions at once, excessively, and with the utmost spatial or corporeal attention paid to every inch of the place where it unfolds? Where is the border between concentration and scattering here? And how can we first throw ourselves into such a performance or creative act, the way a seed is sown without any guarantee that it would germinate? What would need to be set up for this kind of performance to grow, to extend its reach, while remaining rooted in the context wherein it first cropped up? What would its modular self-complication or self-replication in this place, which I have provocatively analogized to the Baroque, entail? And how, if at all, would it engage with the plants themselves?”<sup>38</sup>

In the plan, I proposed this project as an attempt to respond to Marder’s challenge (above) through practical exploration, articulation and further development of experiences from previous projects

37 Arlander 2019a.

38 Marder 2015, 193.

by producing performances with plants and especially trees. The core questions to be explored, according to the plan, were: 1) How does one cooperate with nonhuman entities like plants (trees and shrubs)? 2) How does one further develop experiences and methods from previous attempts at performing landscape? and 3) How does one create actions with plants that human participants can be invited to join? As an overall research task, the project asked: How can one perform landscape by cooperating with trees and other plants and with an awareness of current post-humanist and new-materialist understanding of the environment?

These questions were investigated through practical artistic work, starting with previously used methods, by systematically varying some of their parameters. The main mode of working consisted of documented practical exploration, developed from former techniques of performing landscape, and reflection on the experiences in relation to the theoretical notions mentioned above. The various aspects of the practice, such as using a tripod-mounted camera as a witness or regularly returning to the same site, formed the starting point for a series of experiments in which the parameters were changed and adapted to the cooperation with the selected trees. The research questions were transformed into artistic working questions such as: 1) How does one articulate practical methods for cooperating with plants in poetic event scores or detailed instructions? 2) How does one combine projected video with live performance in a lecture-performance or by projecting a video onto the site where it was recorded?

Three forms of expression were to be initially explored. First were performances for the camera repeated with the same tree and edited to form video works. This method was based on experiences from the series *Animal Years*, which includes works in which I sit on

a birch,<sup>39</sup> in a pine tree,<sup>40</sup> hang from a pine tree,<sup>41</sup> sit under a spruce<sup>42</sup> and hold on to a juniper.<sup>43</sup> The idea was to explore other modes of cooperating with trees on the basis of these year-long projects, in which the focus was on depicting changes in the landscape over time by repeating the same actions and images once a week for a year, not the collaboration with trees as such. New explorations of year-long performances with specific trees were made during each year of the project: in Helsinki with elms and with an alder stump in Kaivopuisto Park in 2017;<sup>44</sup> in Stockholm in 2017 with a sycamore in Humlegården and a beech (actually a hornbeam) in Djurgården;<sup>45</sup> in 2018 with two spruce stumps and two pine trees in Lill-Jansskog;<sup>46</sup> and in 2019 with a Tatarian maple in Nobelparken.<sup>47</sup>

A second form consisted of participatory performances in which spectators and visitors were invited to join a recorded performance, later to be edited into a video and projected onto the same site in a live performance. This method had been tentatively explored in

39 *Sitting on a Birch* (2006) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=497828>

40 *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=134462>

41 *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar* (2007) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1097773>

42 *Under the Spruce I–III* (2008) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=498123>

43 *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper* (2012) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=134477>

44 *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1–2* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476426> and *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476425>

45 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325188>

46 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410491>

47 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2019 (–2020) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550275>



some performances in which I invited spectators to participate<sup>48</sup> and worked with projections on the site of recording in a co-performance of sorts.<sup>49</sup> In these examples, I hung a small swing in a tree and invited passersby to swing, to experience the tree and to perform for the camera. The video was edited and projected back onto the tree while I tried to swing in synch with the people swinging in the image. With this technique, to project a video of a tree back onto the same tree, I sought to develop other forms of cooperation with trees and various combinations of video and live performance. I performed an experiment during the Research Week at SKH in Stockholm in January 2018, video-recording a participatory action with a pine in Lill-Jansskog. Although the event was successful as an experience, the video material was not very interesting, and I abandoned further experiments with this technique.<sup>50</sup>

A third form was the creation of monologues for specific trees, which could be combined with live action into a lecture performance. This method was based on an ongoing albeit irregularly repeated series of site-specific miniature audio works, *Trees Talk*,<sup>51</sup> which are created for specific trees or bushes and are loosely based on the Irish tree alphabet, beth – luis – nion (birch – rowan – ash). So far, the following trees have performed short monologues via headphones or earphones hanging from their branches: birch, rowan, ash, alder and sycamore (2003); oak, sycamore, linden, pine and spruce

48 *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (2014) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1097801>

49 *Swinging in Moonlight* (2014) <https://vimeo.com/103242549> and *Swinging Together* (2015) <https://vimeo.com/137770819>

50 I returned to this technique later, however, in 2021 for a two-part performance on Öró. See the blog post <https://meetingswithtrees.com/2021/09/04/performing-with-a-pine/>

51 See “Talking Trees” on the Research Catalogue <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/62946/159786>

(2004); willow (2006); apple tree (2008); hawthorn (2010); and hazel (2016, via QR code). The talking trees have consisted of sound installations or miniature nonstop audio plays written, performed and recorded by me, and have been presented during festivals or at outdoor exhibitions from headphones hanging from the trees in question. When planning the project, I wondered how these narrative monologues could be developed into something more interactive. Perhaps they could serve as a basis for a lecture performance, a form I had not really worked with before but which I now planned to explore. By combining video projection, live performance and voice-over as a monologue, the resulting mixture – perhaps a lecture-performance or performance-lecture – could be shared with the public and the research community. Thus, I made some small experiments with lecture performances during the project, mainly in conference contexts, but soon found the possibility of adding voiceover directly to the videos more interesting: texts written, read and recorded in a simple manner were added to a video, either as a narrative of sorts, in the form of a diary<sup>52</sup> or letter<sup>53</sup> and then as a more academic-style essay.<sup>54</sup> At the end of the project, I experimented with writing letters to trees while sitting next to the trees as an action, a performance for the camera.<sup>55</sup>

On the basis of various experiments with trees, my plan was to create more or less poetical texts, instructions or event scores to

52 *Sunday with a Pine – with text* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=410375>

53 *Year of the Dog in Little Jan’s Forest (Sitting in a Pine) – with text* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>

54 *Hanging in a Pine (with text)* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026>

55 For example, *Dear Olive Tree* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760758> and *Dear Ficus Macrophylla I and II* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>

be realized and executed or simply contemplated as a revitalization of an old Fluxus technique updated for current concerns. Thus, a central dimension of the project was to distil and articulate methods for cooperating or co-performing with trees, to be adopted as a kind of poetic and critical practice. Although event scores did not assume as central a role in the project outcomes as I expected, some event scores were created as part of the *Tree Calendar* in Helsinki (2017)<sup>56</sup> and Stockholm (2018).<sup>57</sup> These two series of video works based on the Celtic lunar calendar, in which each month is named after a tree, were not included in the original plan but became an important part of the project, with one-off performances with trees forming a counterforce to the repeated year-long projects.

All in all, *Performing with Plants* did produce artworks in the form of performances for camera, video works, performance events with participants, lecture performances and poetical event scores – that is, articulated methods for and a series of examples of how to cooperate and co-perform with trees, as promised in the plan. Perhaps the major artistic output was the photobook *Att uppträda med Träd – Performing with Trees* (Arlander 2019g). As intended, the project resulted in theoretically reflective articles<sup>58</sup> and in hybrid outcomes like a blog about the process, an open archive of the media on the Research Catalogue, conference presentations in the context of the Performance as Research Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the Artistic Research Working Group of Performance Studies International (PSi), the Col-

56 *The Tree Calendar in Helsinki* (2017) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/327809>

57 *The Stockholm Tree Calendar* (2018) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/425654>

58 The published articles are listed on a specific page in the archive <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/709778>

loquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts (CARPA) and others.<sup>59</sup> Rather than a symposium with invited guest speakers, as mentioned in the original plan, the project organized four research days with presentations based on open calls with the theme “Working with the Vegetal”, which later led to an issue of the journal *Ruukku*.<sup>60</sup>

By writing a research blog about the process<sup>61</sup> and by compiling an open media archive of the material on the Research Catalogue,<sup>62</sup> all the data were immediately made available for the artistic research community and others interested in the project. Afterwards, the blog posts served as an archive of the project. Thus, the publicly documented processes were, on the one hand, part of the methodology of the project and, on the other hand, part of the artworks and research output. Besides developing and articulating methods for cooperating with plants, especially trees, the plan mentioned that the project was to function as an exploration in preparation for a possible larger project dealing with the topic. Although this future project probably referred to the second part taking place in Stockholm, it can, in hindsight, be linked to a new project developed from my experiences with *Performing with Plants*, that is *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.<sup>63</sup>

59 See Appendix, a list of talks and conference presentations.

60 Working with the Vegetal, *Ruukku – Studies in Artistic Research* #16 2021 <http://ruukku-journal.fi/en/issues/16>

61 I actually used two blogs, mainly the blog “artistic research in Stockholm” <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com> and also the blogs on my personal website <https://annettearlander.com>

62 See the project archive “Performing with Plants – Att uppträda/ samarbete med växter” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>

63 *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, project blog <https://meetingswithtrees.com>

## Critical plant studies



*Dear Olive Tree* (2019) video still

When writing the plan in 2016, although inspired by Michael Marder and his thoughts,<sup>64</sup> I was not aware of the rapidly growing field of critical plant studies. In a text written for the publication celebrating the first twenty years of research at the Academy of Fine Arts,<sup>65</sup> I described the field briefly and noted how the growing interest in plant studies in recent years, to some extent as a further development of burgeoning animal studies<sup>66</sup> and post-humanist thinking,<sup>67</sup> has focused on plant rights,<sup>68</sup> plant thinking,<sup>69</sup> plant theory,<sup>70</sup> plant

philosophy,<sup>71</sup> the language of plants,<sup>72</sup> queer plants<sup>73</sup> and more. There is currently a “plant turn”<sup>74</sup> underway in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, with an abundance of popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence and communication.<sup>75</sup> An emerging field of critical plant studies<sup>76</sup> can be linked to “art’s return to vegetal life”<sup>77</sup> and to looking at plants in art.<sup>78</sup> Discussions of plants and performance, however, are mostly linked to ecology in broader terms,<sup>79</sup> with some exceptions such as an interest in “vegetalized performance”.<sup>80</sup> There is no issue of *Performance Research* titled “On Plants” or “On Vegetation” yet, compared with to the two double-issues of *Antennae*<sup>81</sup> that look at plants and art. My own contributions focusing on performing with trees or shrubs have not really found their way into these discussions.<sup>82</sup> The first text related to plants, “Performing with Trees: Landscape and Artistic Research” (2010) was published in an anthology of research through practice in performance<sup>83</sup> and looked at approaches to performing with trees that I had until then used in performing landscape.

64 For example, in “Working with a Witches’ Broom” (Arlander 2014c).

65 Arlander 2019f

66 Derrida 2002; Haraway 2008.

67 Wolfe 2010; Braidotti 2013.

68 Hall 2011.

69 Marder 2013; Irigaray and Marder 2016.

70 Nealon 2016.

71 Miller 2008; Coccia 2019.

72 Kranz, Schwan, Wittrock 2016; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017.

73 Sandilands 2017.

74 Myers 2017.

75 Chamovitz 2017; Mancuso & Viola 2015; Wohlleben 2016.

76 Gibson & Brits 2018.

77 Gibson 2018.

78 Aloï 2018.

79 For example, *Performing Ethos*, Volume 5 (2014) or *Performance Research: On Ecology* (2012).

80 Nolić & Radulović 2018.

81 *Antennae* issue 17 and 18/ 2011 and *Antennae* issue 51 and 52/ 2020.

82 Arlander 2010; 2015; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a, 2020.

83 In John Freeman *Blood, Sweat & Theory: Research through Practice in Performance*. Libri Publishing 2010, 158–176.

Some writers focusing on plants observe “that the Western attitude toward plants is zoocentric and hierarchical” and ignores the “continuity of life ... in favour of constructing sharp discontinuities between humans, plants, and animals”, focusing on “the gross differences” rather than “shared characteristics such as life and growth”.<sup>84</sup> Considering our relationship to plants, Matthew Hall asked in 2011 how we could move “from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care” and even incorporate plants “into dialogical relationships”.<sup>85</sup> These questions are obviously relevant to any attempts to perform with plants. Hall wants us to understand plants as “active, self-directed, even intelligent Beings” and goes as far as to promote the “recognition of plants as persons” to emphasize “the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives”.<sup>86</sup> He further stresses how “working closely with individual plant persons also has the potential to shift the view of nature as an organic, homogenized whole—which ... contributes to the backgrounding of nature”.<sup>87</sup> Although useful as an ethical challenge, such extended individualism is difficult to combine with the views of continental plant philosophy<sup>88</sup> or with new-materialist feminist thought<sup>89</sup> and is problematic in view of current understandings of co-evolution and symbiogenesis.<sup>90</sup>

Rather than extend individuality and personhood to plants, contemporary philosophy challenges humans to recognize the planthood

84 Hall 2011, 157.

85 Hall 2011, 156.

86 Hall 2011, 169.

87 Hall 2011, 169.

88 Marder 2013; Irigaray and Marder 2016; Coccia 2019.

89 Barad 2007; Alaimo 2010; Braidotti 2013.

90 See, for example, Haraway 2017; Mcfall Nagai 2017; Gilbert 2017.

in themselves. Michael Marder, a philosopher known for his engagement with the vegetal, offers a critique of the Western legacy of plant neglect by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics and challenges us to learn from the dispersed life of plants in his book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013). Marder tries to formulate a post-metaphysical way of thinking by focusing on “the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought”<sup>91</sup> and stresses the importance of understanding vegetal life for our attempts to avoid metaphysical dualism. In his view, “all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and ... neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible”<sup>92</sup> rather than indivisible, individuals. When trying to understand what it means to “live with” other beings, we can look at vegetation, because “the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with”.<sup>93</sup> Divisibility and participation characterize the life of plants: “the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an onto-political effect of plant-soul” that must “eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority”,<sup>94</sup> Marder writes. Moreover, “every consideration of a post-foundational, post-metaphysical ethics and politics worthy of its name must admit the contributions of vegetal life to ... the non-essentialized mode of ‘living with’”,<sup>95</sup> he adds. Perhaps, rather than personhood or individualism, we could think of this “living with” others nearby, the embeddedness and contextuality that characterizes plants as the source of their specificity, the unique character of certain trees that we can acknowledge and appreciate. Another question is the

91 Marder 2013a, 152.

92 Marder 2013a, 51.

93 Ibid.

94 Marder 2013a, 53.

95 Ibid.

problem of “living with” in terms of the human-plant relationship, even in its simplest form of sitting with a shrub; more of this later.

For Marder, all radically contextual thought is an inheritor of vegetal life.<sup>96</sup> Responding to Deleuze and Guattari’s injunction “Follow the plants!” he endorses irreverent plant-thinking on the path to “becoming plant”. Thinking is not the sole privilege of the human subject; Marder suggests *it thinks*, an impersonal, non-subjective and non-anthropomorphic agency.<sup>97</sup> The vegetal *it thinks* – for instance, a tree that thinks – refers to an undecided subject, as the subject in the expression “it is raining”. *It thinks* is not concerned with “Who or what does the thinking?” but “When and where does thinking happen?” because it arises from and returns to the plant’s embeddedness in the environment, Marder explains. In an article or exposition called “Working with a Witches’ Broom”,<sup>98</sup> I presented some of his ideas, which I have returned to in many later texts, and also his collaborations with Luce Irigaray,<sup>99</sup> which I will come back to here as well.

In his book *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (2016) Jeffrey Nealon argues that “the vegetal *psukhe* of life” is a more appropriate notion to characterize the biopolitical present than the individual human-animal “with its hidden life and its projected world”.<sup>100</sup> With regard to biopolitics and animal studies, he suggests “the discourses of contemporary biopolitics may just need a little water and sunlight” as well as “some turning of the theoretical soil in which the biopolitical debate originally grew – Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari” to develop a “more robust notion of what constitutes

96 Marder 2013a, 169.

97 Marder 2013a, 165.

98 Arlander 2014c.

99 Irigaray and Marder 2016; Arlander 2018b.

100 Nealon 2016, 106.

‘life’ beyond the human”.<sup>101</sup> He further suggests that “it might be time to start diagnosing the world not as a static or dynamic backdrop ... but as the ecological territory that cuts across all strata of life”, to understand life as “rhizomatic territories”, primarily defined “by the practices of emergence and transformation”.<sup>102</sup> The debates in biopolitics have practical consequences; referring to current seed leasing practices he notes: “In the future you and I may still own our bodies, but ... as the Monsanto farmer owns his field ... dependent on serial purchasing of expensive patented materials to keep the enterprise alive.” Rather than simply considering what humans should do now, he suggests following Foucault’s advice “to pay closer attention to what our doing does”.<sup>103</sup>

This advice or demand is relevant to any kind of performing with plants, including my seemingly innocent performances for camera with trees and shrubs. What is performing with plants doing to the plants, to the human performer, to the occasional passersby, to the viewer of the resulting video work and to others involved, whether human or not? So far, I have tried to proceed in a manner with the least possible consequences for the trees involved. Performing with trees creates associations to activist projects and environmental struggles like sitting in trees<sup>104</sup>, which my modest practices have very little in common with in terms of media impact or of risks involved. Looking at the path in the grass, however, leading from the camera tripod to the trunk formed by my weekly visits, I realize there is no way of *not* having an impact.

Within critical plant studies, several disciplines and discourses are sometimes combined. For example, in *The Language of Plants:*

101 Nealon 2016, xv.

102 Nealon 2016, 106–107.

103 Nealon 2016, 113.

104 See, for example, Philp 2018.

*Science, Philosophy, Literature*, the problems of communicating with and among plants are considered through the different discourses of science, philosophy and literature. Despite the seeming impossibility to understand plants, “we should continue trying to listen what plants tell us in their own modes of expression”.<sup>105</sup> Scientist Monica Gagliano, who is also well-known for her popular accounts related to plants,<sup>106</sup> tries to bridge the gap “between the human and nonhuman world” on the one hand by “showing the greater complexity of nonhuman communication”, bringing “nature closer to the human world, via, ultimately, the medium of a more universal understanding of language” and on the other hand by “showing that ... human language is ... by virtue of its very ‘materiality’, closer than we think to the language of nonhuman others”.<sup>107</sup> By “treating language as a real and perceivable feature of the whole organism-environment system”, she is able to “consider language as a meaning-making activity at the core of every form of life, whether human or not”.<sup>108</sup> In her concluding remarks, she nevertheless blames human language for our disconnectedness and suggests that the idea of humans as detached from and dominating other forms of life is “incarnated within the medium of communication itself”, because the symbols we use in language are detached from and only arbitrarily related to what they symbolize: “our abstractive power has resulted in the silencing (rather than the revealing) of the expression and faculties of ourselves as well as others, such as plants”.<sup>109</sup>

In discussing literature as *phytographia* or plant writing, Patricia Vieira proposes “the notion of inscription as a possible bridge over

105 Gagliano, Ryan & Vieira 2017, xviii.

106 Gagliano 2018.

107 Gagliano 2017b, 86.

108 Gagliano 2017b, 87.

109 Gagliano 2017b, 96.

the abyss separating humans from the plant world”, emphasizing that “all beings inscribe themselves in their environment and in the existence of those who surround them”.<sup>110</sup> This line of thought is interesting for some of the practices I have experimented with, such as writing letters to trees; although it seems that the human who writes is doing the inscription, we could also see the trees as inscribing themselves onto the thoughts and the text emerging in the encounter. Concerning communication with plants, in my performing I am usually not attempting to communicate with the trees, to enter into a dialogue, or even really to understand them or make myself understandable to them. Rather, I am trying to be aware of sharing the same time and space with them. By sitting in or with trees, I try to explore how “being with” or “becoming with”, beyond language, could visually take place.

This “being with” could also be understood as an immersion of sorts. In *The Life of Plants: A metaphysics of mixture* (2019), philosopher Emanuele Coccia suggests that a plant “is a paradigm of immersion” because “[p]lants are the breath of all living beings, the world as breath” and “[t]o breathe means to be plunged into a medium that penetrates us in the same way and with the same intensity as we penetrate it”.<sup>111</sup> “Immersion” is one of the terms Coccia uses for the “mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium”.<sup>112</sup> Such mutual compenetration takes place on other levels than breathing, such as digestion, and probably concerns everything we perceive and process, because “to penetrate the surrounding environment is to be penetrated by it”, Coccia notes, and suggests that “in all space of immersion, to act and to be acted

110 Vieira 2017, 217.

111 Coccia 2019, 53.

112 Coccia 2019, 37.

upon are formally indistinguishable”.<sup>113</sup> He understands immersion as a “radical identity of being and doing”, using the experience of swimming as an example.<sup>114</sup> “One cannot exist in a fluid space without modifying, by this very fact, the reality and form of the environment that surrounds us.”<sup>115</sup> How we perform as well as where and with whom are constantly forming not only us but everything around us. My performances have consequences for their environment, whether I intend it or not. By moving in the world, I am modifying the world. How am I modifying the shrub I am posing with?

Some of these discussions related to critical plant studies I will return to in the third part, *Thinking with Trees*, when discussing some of the problems of performing with plants.

### Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees



Meetings with remarkable and unremarkable trees “logo”

To frame this collection of experiences and notes related to but not restricted to *Performing with Plants* is difficult, because that project developed almost seamlessly into a new project, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*. Rather than try to separate

113 Coccia 2019, 37.

114 Ibid.

115 Coccia 2019, 37–38.

and summarize the “findings” of the first project, I will therefore include a brief description of this new project, which at the time of this writing is close to completion.

The title of the artistic research project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (2020–2021), supported by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, alludes to the celebrated photography book *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* (1996) by Thomas Pakenham, and the project in some sense forms a counterpoint to it by questioning what is remarkable and what is unremarkable while focusing on individual trees. The medium in the project was not photography, however, but performance for video and recorded voice. It further developed experiences from *Performing with Plants*, funded by Vetenskapsrådet at Stockholm University of the Arts from 2018–2019, and, as the title suggests, clearly focused on trees, rather than plants more generally.

Although we are often accused of “not seeing the forest for the trees”, this project sought to examine the opposite risk, not seeing the trees for the forest, and look at individual trees. This was not to deny that trees form networks and ecosystems or symbiotic relationships, not only with other trees but with fungi, bacteria and all kinds of micro-organisms, and are in a constant exchange with their environment, as are humans; nor does this deny that forests and woods and substantial groups of trees are needed for producing effective carbon sinks, cooler and fresher urban air, flood resistance and more. Emphasizing individualism is a risky strategy in the current neoliberal capitalist society, where individualism is exaggerated anyway. The project proposed that a focus on singular trees can nevertheless be useful as an important first step towards decolonizing our relationship with “nature”. As late ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003) pointed out, colonialist thinking tends to emphasize a powerful difference between “us” and “them” and to see “them” as all

alike, stereotypical and non-individualized. Thus, the project suggested that attending to particular trees might help us see them as lifeforms that we have much in common with, despite our undeniable differences.

Artistically, the project could be placed at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and video or media art, like my previous project, in the encounter of traditions: performance art's emphasis on embodied presence; video- and media art's valuing of repetition, transformation and critical reflection on technology; and environmental art's sensitivity to the possible effects and side-effects an artwork can have. As mentioned before, historically there has been no lack of artistic engagement with plants, from vegetally inspired music to ornamentation on textiles, pottery and architecture, to paintings, poems and science fiction. Living plants are used as material in practices as divergent as garden design, sonification, floral arrangements and bio art. Vegetation is receiving increased attention in the context of the current climate crises and the rapid extinction of species. With the developments in plant science and the post-humanities, artists, artist-researchers and scholars are looking at plants anew. In scholarly terms, the project could be situated within the field of critical plant studies, which has been linked to "art's return to vegetal life" and to looking at plants in art. As noted, there is a current "plant turn" in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, accompanied by an abundance of popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence, memory and communication. The growing interest in vegetal life is influencing artistic research as well.

In the plan, I further emphasized how rethinking our relationships to other lifeforms is a central task for artists today. Artistic research can contribute through its capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. The project sought to con-

tribute to this endeavor with examples of relatively simple artistic practices. I mentioned that I planned to spend time with trees in various locations – trees that are remarkable in their own context, or are remarkably unremarkable or are perhaps simply strange or peculiar – in order to create video works and video essays. Rather than working with rough time-lapse videos produced over a year and emphasizing the seasonal time cycles, as I had done in previous projects, my aim was to focus on attentive co-presence during shorter time periods, such as a day.

Some preliminary experiments with meetings with trees were made during *Performing with Plants*, such as visiting (with Camilla Bäckstrand) the truly remarkable 9,950-year-old clone Old Tjikko on Fulufället or spending a day with a decidedly unremarkable juniper on Utö (Finland) and creating a diary, *Day with a Juniper*. An important kickstart for this new project was my Arts Research Africa residency in spring 2020, when I spent time at Wits University in Johannesburg in South Africa and worked on the project with the trees there.<sup>116</sup> Due to travel restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, I later worked at various residencies in Finland (such as Mustarinda, Öres, Ars BioArctica, Hailuoto and Eckerö Post & Customs House) and looked for suitable places to meet with remarkable or unremarkable trees closer to home. In the same vein as the previous project, *Performing with Plants*, this new endeavor resulted in video essays and video installations to be shown in the context of contemporary art, and journal articles in the context of critical plant studies, performance studies and artistic research. The outcomes have been shared at international conferences and local seminars.

116 See *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg and Environs* (Arlander 2020d). <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/30395>



A substantial part of the reflections in this book are the results of, and have been written while working with, this new project and while meeting various remarkable and unremarkable trees, encounters I plan to engage with beyond the formal duration of the project (2020–2021). Meanwhile, I hope these reflections will inspire you, dear reader, to go out and meet some significant trees. Even though they might not feel remarkable or significant at first, if you make their acquaintance and visit them several times, you will, in all likelihood, soon find them to be quite significant and special.



*The Tide in Kan Tiang* (2015) video still

## II Performing with Trees

In the following chapters, I look at the various strategies I used during *Performing with Plants*, many of which I had used before and only modified slightly. I was actually surprised that my practice did not change as much as I had expected, even though I would have had the opportunity to experiment with completely different approaches. Rather than try something completely new, my explorations began by refining earlier techniques and then slowly expanding them to include other tools. In the subsequent sections, I look at different aspects of my working methods and strategies one at a time and consider the variations I played with, as well as some approaches that remain unexplored. I have sorted these approaches rather arbitrarily into the following categories or topics: performing for the camera, framing and distance, place and partner, action and position, costume, collaboration, temporality and schedules, writing, video essays, and media formats. Some of these topics I have discussed in relationship to the previous project, *Performing Landscape*, and the first part of *Animal Years*.<sup>117</sup> Some of my basic strategies have become so habitual that I take them for granted and struggle to remember to explicate them, even less

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Arlander 2012, chapter 11, pp. 321–355.

so to try to find alternatives to them. These include, for example: performing for a camera on a tripod at eye-height, repeating the same image to create a manual time-lapse or posing with my back to the camera in order to depersonalize the human figure. In the following, I nevertheless try to look at these choices and at some variations that I explored while performing with trees and to consider the small shifts in emphasis and meaning that result from such variations.

### Performing for a camera on a tripod



*Sitting in a Beech - Rain* (2016) video still

Most performances made today will end up as video clips on the web as some form of documentation<sup>118</sup>, which has generated an increased interest in the possibility to create performances “direct to documentation”, as performances for camera are sometimes called,<sup>119</sup>

118 On YouTube, Vimeo, private websites and so on.

119 The term d2d or direct to documentation was used by the 7a\*11d festival in Toronto <https://7a-11d.ca>

even prior to the explosion of various forms of online performances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. In my own practice, the shift from documenting a performance practice to creating video works with performance as a tool took place gradually. To begin with, I was documenting my performances on Harakka Island on video as a form of evidence that they had taken place. I soon realized, however, that I was more interested in creating video works based on repeated performances and was actually using performance as a tool for production rather than dissemination. I am therefore not discussing the problem of documentation, which often involves the assumption that there is an action or performance that precedes the act of documenting it, although I have earlier considered the question.<sup>120</sup>

The focus on performances for the camera allows an interest in place. One of the starting points for beginning the practice was the focus on the specificity of place, not only a specific audience. This interest in place is somewhat paradoxical, because the purpose of documenting and recording a performance is primarily to enable viewers to enjoy something in a different place and time than the one in which the actual performance took place. A live performance has to be presented in a place suitable for the target audience. In choosing the site for a performance for the camera, one does not have to consider the audience in terms of accessibility, convenience or comfort. A performance on camera can choose any suitable place and invite a small primary audience, rely on chance encounters or trust the camera as the sole witness, and then create a work from the results – the documentation – which will hopefully find a secondary audience and a posterior life. Working with documentation of a performance

120 For example, chapter 10.1. “Documentation, Performance and Research” (Arlander 2012, 274–286).

as material provides the option to create a new kind of semi-fictional performance that takes place only in the space of the video.<sup>121</sup>

The choice of performing mainly or even entirely for the camera creates other possibilities for the production, especially if using a tripod-mounted camera, which enables one to work alone in a dual role, both behind and in front of the camera. In my examples, the possibilities afforded by working with a camera could be listed in the following ways:

- 1) A special or marginal place not easily accessed by others or with a fragile natural environment that must be protected from too many visitors; not everybody needs to come to the site.
- 2) Addressing a secondary audience who would not bother to visit the place or be interested in this type of activity in situ; they could nevertheless enjoy it on video or on the web.
- 3) An insignificant activity such as sitting on a tree stump, which would not hold the attention of an audience alone, but which can become interesting over time; the performance is produced by repetition and through editing, not by a single event.
- 4) An unconventional duration and process, such as repeating an action once a week for a year; most audiences would find it cumbersome to witness a performance in person once a week for a year.
- 5) A practice with an impact on the performer, regardless of or besides the effect intended with regard to the viewer.

All these aspects were relevant when performing with trees for the duration of a year in Stockholm in 2017, 2018 and 2019. No audi-

<sup>121</sup> Philip Auslander calls this “theatrical documentation”, using Yves Klein’s constructed photo *Leap into the Void* as a classic example (Auslander 2006).

ence was present, except for the various beings inhabiting the place and occasional passersby. The camera on its tripod was the witness, producing video documentations of the repeated moments and the changes taking place between them. The video works made from the recordings of such repeated performances combine rough documentary-quality footage produced by simple camerawork (a tripod-mounted camera with automatic focus) that is akin to a “live recording” with the semi-fictional effect created by editing out the beginning and end of each action or pose to produce an illusion of continuity – or rather a play on the idea, because the illusion is not complete but only hinted at. While video works based on only one session with a tree, which resemble still-images, accentuate the documentary quality by highlighting a particular moment with a tree on site, these repeated performances and the rough time-lapse videos based on them focus on the changes taking place between the repetitions, the differences between the recordings. One could say that their purpose is to produce repetitions with a difference.

### Framing and distance



*Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay) 2016 – video still*

A crucial element in creating a time-lapse video, or any lens-based work for that matter, is the choice of framing. When working with still photography, adjustments to the framing of the image are easier; with video works, the initial framing is what you get, unless you

want to use postproduction processes. Because the video format or film format is horizontal, it is not very well suited to depicting vertical creatures such as trees.<sup>122</sup> Maintaining the human scale and the landscape format in the images often completely disregards the specificity of the vertical tree-partner. Although the use of camera phones has made vertical videos more common, vertical material is still complicated for most editing programs, websites and projection apparatuses. This situation might change in the future, but for now I use the horizontal landscape format.<sup>123</sup>

Framing is a key tool for the composition of the image when working in the real world; what to include within the frame and what to exclude and which angle and distance to choose. The tree will stay where it is; the camera has to move. The position and placement of the human performer can be played with. Most of my performances with trees follow fairly conventional compositional principles, with the human figure embedded in the landscape but nevertheless forming the focal point in the images. The fact that the human is often depicted from the back, as an impersonal figure or form, alleviates this dominance to some extent but introduces other problems, such as an immediate association to the “Rückenfiguren” in German romantic landscapes.

In time-lapse works, it is of course important to try to maintain the initial framing as strictly as possible for the continuity to work. This is usually solved by setting up a camera on a fixed spot, but in

122 This is clearly demonstrated, for example, by Eija-Liisa Ahtila in her portrait of a spruce in *Horizontal* (2011).

123 I included one vertical image in the installation *Helsinki Tree Calendar* 2018 (4 min. 40 sec.) <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/the-helsinki-tree-calendar-2/> in which one of thirteen monitors is planned to be turned vertical. In the screening version of *Helsinki Tree Calendar* 2018 (17 min. 42 sec.) <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/the-helsinki-tree-calendar/>, the vertical image is nevertheless flipped horizontally.

my rough, manual way of working, where I often return to the same spot only once a week or so, leaving the camera on site is usually not an option. Therefore, the choice of markers to help repeat the same framing is important. Before going into detail, I should perhaps note that I work with a tripod-mounted camera and usually with the tripod at maximum height, which creates a perspective rather close to eye level of a small person. I also use a fixed objective, rather than a zoom, and prefer to change the position of the tripod and the camera instead of adjusting the framing via the objective. This probably has to do with the fact that I have no training in photography or filmmaking and like to keep all possible parameters as simple as possible and thus reduce the possibility of mistakes. For this reason, I work with two kinds of markers to maintain the framing: first, markers for placing the tripod within the terrain, thus choosing the distance to the tree, the angle and perspective from where to look at it; and second, markers within the image itself to maintain the framing, such as a branch or shrub or any fairly stable detail on the left and right, as well as down, to try to keep the framing constant. Often, the placement of the horizon is an important marker, but in forests and urban environments that is rarely available. Despite my efforts to keep the framing constant, there are often strange shifts, especially when the environment changes due to the weather. In my earlier work, the horizon might swing here and there. My current camera luckily indicates whether the horizon is straight. The problem of maintaining the same framing when repeating the image is of course only one aspect of the problem of framing and is relevant mainly to time-lapse videos.

A difficulty to consider in performing with all plants is the question of scale. When performing with trees, a crucial challenge for framing the image comes from the discrepancy between the size of the tree and the human body. Most trees are much larger and taller than humans and therefore are difficult to juxtapose with a human

body or fit within the same frame. Therefore, the issue is often how much of the tree one can fit into the frame and whether it is even possible to get the whole tree within the frame due to the presence of other vegetation. This is related to distance, of course, where the tree can be viewed as a whole only from afar. With the pines in Nida, I systematically explored variations within the spectrum from part of the tree and part of the human viewed close-up to the whole tree in a full shot in the distance with the human barely or not at all visible.<sup>124</sup> There I recorded four performances with one pine tree,<sup>125</sup> first showing only a fragment of the tree and the human, with both in silhouette, or by focusing on the “skin” of the pine and reducing the human to a part of the scarf, then by increasing the distance to adapt to the scale of the tree in order to show it in full, or by placing the camera at mid-distance, where the human is still discernible in the tree.

The choice of distance is often dependent on the terrain, with roads or paths restricting the placement of the tripod. In many cases, other trees or vegetation prevent the depiction of a tree in full size by blocking the view, or the tree chosen as the partner or protagonist disappears among other vegetation. In parks, trees are sometimes planted to stand more isolated, but in woods and forests, trees that seem to stand out are often intertwined with other vegetation. This poses no problem for the human eye, but the camera sees everything with equal attention. Framing the image is thus often a

124 See Arlander 2019a.

125 See *Resting with a Pine 9* (2017) 5 min. 26 sec., *Resting with a Pine 10* (2017) 7 min. 10 sec., *Resting with a Pine 11* (2017) 7 min. 10 sec., and *Resting with a Pine 12* (2017) 6 min. 15 sec., performed on 26.9.2017. I also recorded four videos of the view from the pine at the same time, *View from a Pine 1*, 5 min. 26 sec., *View from a Pine 2*, 6 min. 43 sec., *View from a Pine 3*, 6 min. 43 sec., and *View from a Pine 4*, 6 min. 15 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=393160>

problem not only in relationship to the human figure but also to the surrounding landscape.

In my repeated visits to trees in Helsinki and Stockholm during the first year of the project in 2017, the problem of framing was obvious. I deliberately chose two alternatives when sitting on the divided trunk of a sycamore in Stockholm and with a group of elm trees in Helsinki to indicate and demonstrate the difficulty. Another reason was that I simply could not decide whether it was more interesting to show only part of the human figure and part of the tree trunk in close-up or try to show a little bit more of the tree from a distance. The images with the sycamore are paradoxical in the sense that they show almost nothing of the tree itself, with the back of the human figure in focus.<sup>126</sup> The images with the beech from the same year are more successful in depicting the tree, although only a very small part of the tree is included within the frame, because the thick branches are prominent and fill the foreground of the image, while the human is more embedded in the tree, partly hidden by the branches.<sup>127</sup> (Later, I discovered that the tree is actually a hornbeam, not a beech, but I did not change the title.)

When sitting on a tree stump, the framing is easier; the size or scale of the human figure can be allowed to dominate. Although the

126 This problem I have discussed in the exposition “Behind the back of Linnaeus” (Arlander 2020).

127 See *Sitting in the Beech – Snow* (8 min. 20 sec.) performed on 27 November 2016, and *Sitting in the Beech – Rain* (6 min. 50 sec.) performed 10 December 2016 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=331095> *With a Beech in Djurgården* was performed between 7.1.2017 and 16.12.2017 altogether 44 times. The full-length version is divided into *With a Beech in Djurgården (Spring)* (2 h. 5 min. 19 sec.) and *With a Beech in Djurgården (Autumn)* (1 h. 33. min. 29. sec.). There is also a shorter version with one-minute images of each session, *With a Beech in Djurgården* (44 min. 10 sec.), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=438266>

remaining trunk of the double alder, whose stump I am sitting on in Kaivopuisto Park in 2017, is visible,<sup>128</sup> most of the tree is cropped out of the frame. The same is true for the spruce stumps I sat on in Stockholm in 2018, although the heavy trunk lying next to the stump forming a diagonal in the first part<sup>129</sup> is a rather dominating presence, at least compared with the barely visible stump I am sitting on in the second part,<sup>130</sup> where mainly the surrounding spruces come to the fore. We could think of a continuum between the human scale and tree scale, where at the human end, as in *With a Sycamore in Humlegården 1*, a large part of the human and a very small part of the tree are shown in relative close-up within the image frame, while the other extreme, the tree scale, perhaps could be exemplified by *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 2*, where the human is a small figure among the tall trees. Even in this case, however, only the lower part of the spruces is visible within the image frame.

128 See *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto* (2018) 100 min. 10 sec., performed between 12.1. and 17.12.2017 on an alder stub in Kaivopuisto park in Helsinki altogether 100 times. The full-length version consists of *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Spring)*, 3 h. 49. min. 23 sec., and *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Autumn)*, 3 h. 54 min. 12 sec., <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476425>

129 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 1* (2019) 100 min. 10 sec., with 1-minute clips of each image, performed in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019. There is a brief version with 10-second clips, *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) mini* (2019) 16 min. 50 sec. The full-length version *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 1.1-3* (2019) consists of three parts, 1.1. is 2 h. 46 min. 12 sec., 1.2. is 2 h. 35 min. 36 sec., and 1.3. is 2 h. 37 min. 47 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=612191>

130 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 2* (2019) 100 min. 10 sec., with 1-minute clips of each image, performed and recorded in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019. There is a brief version with 10 second clips *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood 2 (On a Spruce Stump) mini* (2019) 16 min. 50 sec. The full-length version *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 2.1-3* (2019) consists of three parts, 2.1 is 2 h. 24. min. 52 sec., 2.2 is 2 h. 51. min. 21 sec. and 2.3 is 2 h. 53. min. 20 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=709461>

In most of the time-lapse videos created in Helsinki and in Stockholm in 2017, 2018 and 2019 the human figure is fairly dominating, regardless of the size or degree of fragmentation, although sometimes it is only partly visible and mostly shown from the back, with the exception of the works that show the figure hanging and swinging in a pine.<sup>131</sup> The trees are all framed to show only the base of the trunk, with varying amounts or no foliage included, with the exception of the smaller pine tree in Stockholm, which is depicted if not in full at least more fully.<sup>132</sup> The sycamore in Humlegården and the alder in Helsinki are extreme cases, in which the species of the trees could hardly be distinguished from the images, as only the bare, divided trunk is seen. The beech (or hornbeam) in Djurgården could probably be identified, although only a few branches are visible, and the same goes for the elms in Kaivopuisto in the first part, because the foliage is prominent during the summer months. The Tatarian maple in Nobelparken in 2019 is a case in point, because the limited size and bent form of the tree allows a larger part of the tree to fit into the frame with the human.

131 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood - Hanging in a Pine* (2019) 15 min. 28 sec., performed and recorded in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026> and *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood - Swinging in a Pine* (2019) 15 min. 28 sec., performed and recorded in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=709462>

132 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)* (2019) 100 min. 10 sec., with 1-minute clips of each image, performed in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019. There is a brief version with 10-second clips *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) mini* (2019) 16 min. 50 sec. The full-length version *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) 1-3* (2019) consists of three parts, part 1, 2 h. 16 min. 46 sec., part 2, 2 h. 49 min. 6 sec. and part 3, 2 h. 58. min. 5 sec. The video essay *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) - with text* (2019) 16 min. 50 sec. is based on the briefest version. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>

When looking at the framing of the year-long time-lapse videos, it seems that I tried to remedy the mistake of focusing too much on the human in 2017 by choosing more variety in the framing in 2018, when I performed in Lill-Jansskogen in Stockholm. Sitting on the large spruce stump is a clear follow-up to sitting on the alder stump in Helsinki, albeit with a completely different disposition, due to the trunk remaining attached to the stump. The domination of the human figure is counterbalanced by the mass of the dramatic diagonal.<sup>133</sup> The companion image in which I sit on a small spruce stump farther from the camera gives more prominence to the surrounding trees, although mainly their trunks are visible within the framing.<sup>134</sup> The two images with pine trees are deliberately different in framing too. The images in which I hang and swing from the branch of a tall pine show only the lower part of the pine trunk and parts of the surrounding forest, and the movement of the human is clearly in focus.<sup>135</sup> The images in which I sit in the small pine are better balanced, because a much larger part of the small tree is visible within the framing and the human figure is partly hidden within the tree.<sup>136</sup> The framing of the image of the strangely bent Tatarian maple that I performed with in 2019 is more interesting because of the diagonal placement of the trunk, with parts of the tree closer to the camera

133 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 1* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=612191>

134 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (On a Spruce Stump) 2* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=709461>

135 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood – Hanging in a Pine* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026> and *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood – Swinging in a Pine* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=709462>

136 See *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)* (2019) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>

while other parts recede into the background or are cropped out.<sup>137</sup> The position of the human, reclining on the hammock-like branch, is more specific, contributing to a more lively composition. The choice of a deciduous tree creates more variation in the images over time as well, since either the presence or absence of foliage affects not only the light but also the visibility of the rest of the landscape and radically changes the character of the images.

The one-off sessions with trees (which I discuss in a separate section), such as in *Helsinki Tree Calendar* (2017) and *Stockholm Tree Calendar* (2018), show a much larger variety of framings, due to the fact that the trees and shrubs vary in shape and form and grow in places that limit the possible positions of the camera and thus the framing of the image. The framing used in experiments with trees and shrubs I made during my travels is highly variable, due to the shifting size and form of my chosen partners and their locations. Some are framed with the human taking over a large part of the image space, such as in *In a Roundabout*,<sup>138</sup> in which I recorded myself sitting on the low branch of a ficus tree from four different directions and had to use close-ups due to the restricted dimensions of the roundabout. In places where the camera could be placed farther away, the framing sometimes tries to show more of the tree, as in *With a Ficus Tree in Puerto Calero*,<sup>139</sup> or to give precedence to its

137 See *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple* (1 h. 48. min) with 1-minute clips of each session, made for installations, performed and recorded in Nobelparken in Stockholm between 9.1.2019 and 15.1.2020, containing 108 sessions with the tree. A brief version, *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple (mini)* (9 min. 10 sec.) with 5-second clips, is for viewing on mobile devices. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=783427>

138 See *In a Roundabout* (2017) 4 min. 59 sec., performed with a tree in a roundabout on Lido di Venezia 19.5.2017, edited into four versions of the same duration <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=368431>

139 See *With a Ficus Tree in Puerto Calero* (2018) 6 min. 9 sec., *With a Ficus Tree –*



specific form while framing the image, as in *In the Lantern Tree*.<sup>140</sup> Even in such cases, the tree usually does not fit within the frame but is severely cropped in one way or another. When performing with shrubs, however, rather than trees, the shrub can be depicted in full with the human being positioned next to the shrub, as in the performances with plants on Gran Canaria and Fuerteventura.<sup>141</sup> When performing for a day with a small juniper on Utö, I not only sat next to the shrub but lay on the ground next to it with my feet up.<sup>142</sup>

The main problem in many cases was that the tree I performed with did not really come to the fore: either the camera was placed too near the tree, as with the ficus in Venice<sup>143</sup> or with the plane

*testing* (2018) 3 min. 38 sec., and *With a Ficus Tree - Looking* (2018) 3 min. 38 sec., performed on 31.12.2018 by the roadside near Puerto Calero on Lanzarote <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=551016>

140 See *In the Lantern Tree* (2018) 14 min. 26 sec., performed on 14.7.2018 in a park next to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrad <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=490560>

141 See, for example, *Sitting with Shrubs 1* (2017) 7 min. 57 sec., *Sitting with Shrubs 2* (2017) 7 min. 34 sec., and *Sitting with Shrubs 3* (2017) 7 min. 26 sec., performed 22.12.2017 on the Jandia peninsula on Fuerteventura <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=417923>, *With the Tabaiba 1* (2018) 10 min. 15 sec., *With the Tabaiba 2* (2018) 10 min. 52 sec., *With the Tabaiba 3* (2018) 10 min. 53 sec., and *With the Tabaiba 4* (2018) 9 min. 37 sec., performed 31.3. and 1.4.2018 near Puerto Rico on Gran Canaria <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=453793> and *With the Cardón 1* (2018) 7 min. 20 sec., *With the Cardón 2* (2018) 8 min. 24 sec., *With the Cardón 3* (2018) 9 min. 16 sec., and *With the Cardón 4* (2018) 8 min. 5 sec., performed 31.3. and 2.4.2018 near Puerto Rico on Gran Canaria <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=454012>

142 See *Day with a Juniper 1-2* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., *Day with a Juniper 2 (long)* (2019) 72 min. 20 sec., and *Day with a Juniper 2 (with text)* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., with the recorded notes as a voice over, performed 3.8.2019 every hour between 7 am and 9 pm on Utö, Finland. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>

143 See *In a Roundabout 1-4* (2017) 4 min. 59 sec., performed 19.5.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=368431>

tree in the crowded park in Shanghai,<sup>144</sup> the result being that the human figure dominates the image and most of the tree is cropped out of the frame. Or the camera is placed so far away that the tree is hardly distinguishable, even though it is not seen in full and the view of the park dominates, as in Belgrade or Karlsruhe.<sup>145</sup> Sometimes, the tree is so huge that the attempt to perform with it and to capture it in one image seems almost ridiculous, as with the yew in Dartington.<sup>146</sup> Each tree poses different problems, depending on its size, form and other characteristics, as well as its location and environment. Performing with trees, despite seeming easy – the tree will not run away or complain – is not that easy at all.

Probably the most articulated experiments with framing and distance were made before the beginning of the project, in Australia in July 2016. *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay)* and *Trees in Victoria (Lorne)*<sup>147</sup> are two-channel installations and split-screen videos that consist of a series of close-ups of fir tree bark on the left and landscape shots with a human being standing next to tall fir trees on the right. Although the trees are not visible in full, their size and shape are highlighted in relationship to the small human figure standing next

144 See *With a Plane Tree in Fuxing Park* (2019) 7 min. 27 sec., performed 14.7.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=658766>

145 For example *In the Lantern Tree* (2018) 14 min. 26 sec., performed 14.7.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=490560> or *With a Linden Tree in Karlsruhe* (2018) 4 min. 15 sec., performed 7.10.2018

146 See, for example, *With a Yew in Dartington* (2019) 5 min. 10. sec., and *With a Yew in Dartington 1& 2* (2019) 9 min. 10 sec., performed 22.6.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=649501>

147 See *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay) 1 and 2* (2016) 14 min. 30 sec., and *Trees in Victoria (Lorne) 3 and 4* (2016) 13 min. 40 sec., also combined into the split-screen videos *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay)* (2017) and *Trees in Victoria (Lorne)* (2017). The performances took place in July 2016 on a trip to the Great Ocean Road in southern Australia. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=384988>

to them. I have described the making of these works in detail elsewhere.<sup>148</sup> However, this exaggerated juxtaposition of two distances – a close-up of the bark and a full shot of the view – emphasizes the individual variations in the shapes of the seemingly similar trees and in their bark. It also clearly demonstrates the importance of framing; what we focus on, what we are looking at, what is included in the image and what is excluded and cropped out. The framing of the image is a key question in matters of inclusion and exclusion; the frame literally creates a cut between what is included in the image and what is excluded. Elsewhere, I have discussed the problem of framing in relationship to Karen Barad’s notion of “agential cut”.<sup>149</sup>

Framing is a relevant topic in the discourse of documentary film. Although my video practice could be called documentary, it is far removed from the concerns of traditional documentary film; the discussions in that context can nevertheless highlight the relevance of framing to other types of practices. In her study *Soul of the Documentary: Framing, Expression, Ethics*, Ilona Hongisto (2015) “distinguishes the documentary from other cinematic modalities” by emphasizing the “involvement with a world that continues beyond the film’s frame”.<sup>150</sup> She observes how “despite the moving compositions of the real”, a common understanding within documentary cinema is to “posit the world depicted in documentary films as relatively stable and thus rationally verifiable” with a “tendency to freeze process in order to make it available for further investigation”.<sup>151</sup> Hongisto prefers to see “the real depicted in documentary films as dynamic in its own right” and therefore she “adjusts the idea of documentary cinema

148 Arlander 2019d.

149 Arlander 2018f.

150 Hongisto 2015, 11.

151 Ibid.

accordingly”.<sup>152</sup> She stresses the importance of framing and argues that “documentary cinema captivates viewers not so much because of the claims that it makes”; rather “it constantly reminds us that the real is not limited to what is directly perceivable in the images”.<sup>153</sup> She further observes how framing forms “a threshold to a world of becoming rich in the transformative potential”, which in turn has implications for the “the ethical stakes of documentary cinema” and shifts the focus from “producing accurate and authentic representations to creatively contributing to the transformability of actual beings in the real”.<sup>154</sup> According to Hongisto, “framing is the performative practice with which documentary cinema participates in and contributes to the real as process”.<sup>155</sup> She is particularly interested in cases in which a documentary “intervenes in the real as process” and stresses that “the lives and events depicted in its frames continue beyond the film”.<sup>156</sup> In her concluding remarks, a discussion of ethics, Hongisto explains her view of the importance of framing:

“Documentary cinema operates in the real by framing it and, therefore, also engages with what remains beyond the frame. This endows documentary films with a particular agency in the real and issues them with a related ethical prerogative. Framing comes with the double bond of capturing and expressing, which locates documentary agency in capturing the world in its becoming and expressing it as a sensation of the real’s continuous unfolding.”<sup>157</sup>

152 Ibid.

153 Hongisto 2015, 12.

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid.

156 Hongisto 2015, 135.

157 Ibid.

To further underline her point, she states: “The ethical stakes in working with the vibrant and expressive nature of the real – its perpetual becoming – have to do with harnessing process into a sensation that the world could be different.”<sup>158</sup>

This view of the ethics of documentary is relevant to many types of lens-based practices, including my performances with plants, which operate in the real by framing it through the inclusion and exclusion of items in the frame. Working with time-lapse videos is one way to meet the challenge of capturing the world in its becoming and expressing its continuous unfolding. Whether such time-lapse strategies emphasize that the world could be different, or rather point at the eternal return of cyclical time, is another question.

In my examples of *Trees in Victoria*, the fir trees certainly do live their lives beyond my recordings of their bark or of myself standing next to them on the shore in Apollo Bay and Lorne. I did not intervene in their lives in any substantial way, and I had no deliberate intention to emphasize that they or their world could be different. What I hopefully did point out, albeit in a simple manner, was that it makes a difference how and what we look at and what we focus on. The key tools for such focusing are the framing of the image and the distance to the camera, as well as the position of the human figure.

The question of framing is relevant as an indicator of importance and value; compositional strategies have ethical implications when thinking of the tree as a performing partner rather than a prop or furniture-like element in the image. How can I claim to be performing with plants if my partner in performance is not even properly visible?

158 Ibid.

## Place and partner



*With an Alder in Kaivopuisto* (2018) video still

When performing with trees, the choice of performance partner – choosing a tree – is at the same time the choice of the site. In the previous discussions concerning framing, I have not problematized the selection or choice of trees, which nevertheless form the core of the practice in terms of decision-making and effort. This conflation of performer and place could be discussed as an extreme form of site-specificity, and I return to that in the second part. It is nevertheless also worth looking at the practical aspects influencing my choices. Finding the right tree is often the main challenge, both when it comes to choosing a partner for a year-long practice and finding an interesting tree to perform with for a moment in an unfamiliar city within the timespan of one afternoon, for example. In some cases, traveling to a specific tree and locating it can be an arduous task, as in the case of Old Tjikko in Fulußjället National Park or the ancient olive trees in Uldecona, Spain. And in other cases, finding the right tree can be difficult because of geographical restrictions, as when trying to find a holly growing in Helsinki or Stockholm for the tree calendar.

The most important considerations regarding the choice of trees to perform with have been a) the form, size and aesthetic appearance of the tree, as well as the species, when relevant, as in the case of the tree calendars, in which each month is named after a specific tree species b) the position of the tree within the environment, including the possibility to place the camera tripod at a suitable distance and to frame the tree as distinct from its surroundings c) the structure of the tree in terms of the possibility to climb up and sit in the tree or in some other manner pose together with it, and last but not least d) the accessibility and location of the tree, for instance with regard to proximity to home or workspace, especially when choosing a tree to visit repeatedly for a year or every hour for a day.

Regarding the year-long repeated performances, the choice of tree or performing partner is especially important, and I have often made several attempts before deciding on a specific tree. These attempts tend to be forgotten, however, when the practice is established. Blog posts describing my first efforts in choosing the trees to perform with in Helsinki<sup>159</sup> and Stockholm<sup>160</sup> can serve as examples. When the tree is chosen, there remains the choices of framing, as discussed before, and the decision of how to position oneself in or with the tree – the action or pose.

159 See “Where to begin in Helsinki” <https://annettearlander.com/2017/01/10/where-to-begin-in-helsinki/>

160 See “The first attempts in Stockholm – choosing the trees” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316681>

## Action and position



*Swinging - Hanging* (2019) video still

What can you do with a plant? What actions to perform or perhaps poses to adopt; how does one place or position oneself in relation to a plant when performing for the camera together? The question of action or stillness is an important issue to consider, because action or movement immediately attracts attention, while stillness is one way of trying to share a plant's mode of being, at least momentarily. Stillness or at least apparent stillness seems to be the most obvious option in most cases. How to place oneself in the tree or with the tree to be able to be still thus becomes the main challenge.

Being still in or with a tree does not necessarily involve immobility; the notion of still-act, however, is relevant within the context. Dance scholar André Lepecki has analyzed performances or still-acts by artists as aesthetic, ethical and political reactions to contemporary demands for constant movement.<sup>161</sup> The notion is based on the idea of the political power of stopping, of stillness, proposed by anthropologist Nadia Seremitakis.<sup>162</sup> The still-act is a concept used by Seremitakis to describe moments a subject interrupts historical flow and poses questions. Stillness does not presuppose stiffness or death-like immobility but, rather, demands a suspension or

161 Especially in his study *Exhausting Dance* (Lepecki 2006).

162 Seremitakis 1994.

temporary cessation of movement, a bodily interruption in situations that call for a certain amount of flow. The still-act acts because it questions the economy of the use of time and reveals the possibility of agency within a regime that controls capital, subjectivity, labor and mobility.<sup>163</sup> For instance, in situations where things seem to move inevitably towards a conflict or disaster, the mere act of stopping to enable reflection can be a strong political act. My moments of stillness with trees are not conceived as primarily political acts, but they could in some cases have that function too.

The main action in performing with plants has been sitting, such as on the trunk of an elm or on an alder stub in Helsinki, in a sycamore and beech in Stockholm (2017), on two spruce stumps and in a pine tree in Stockholm (2018) and sitting on or actually reclining in a Tatarian maple in Stockholm (2019). The only actions with visible movement have been hanging and swinging from a pine in Stockholm (2018). Actions repeated with a tree for a day have included, besides sitting in the pine in Nida, standing next to and holding on to a downy birch in Rekdal, next to Old Tjikko in Fulufjället or lying on the ground besides the Juniper on Utö (Finland). In previous years, I explored other types of repeatable actions like walking past the camera, twirling around with arms spread out, walking in a circle while bound with a chain to an iron ring, walking up and down stairs, swinging in a swing and so on. When performing with plants, all such actions seemed useless, diverting attention from the plant or the encounter between the human and the tree. Besides basic actions or poses performed for the camera with trees, such as sitting or standing, I have explored another type of action, namely writing with and next to trees, performing writing for the camera, which I discuss in a separate section.

163 Lepecki 2006, 15.

Sitting in a tree, even if not very high up, differs from sitting on a tree stump, and being able to easily climb a tree has been one of the main aspects I have considered when choosing a tree partner, in addition to location and the possibility to frame the image in a way that the tree can appear on its own, distinguishable from other trees nearby. How one positions oneself in the tree is often related to the framing of the image but also to the affordance of the tree. What seems like a self-evident choice of pose when the practice is established is not always easy to decide, as is evidenced by some images depicting my first attempts with trees in Stockholm<sup>164</sup> or the alternative trees included in a blog post when beginning in Helsinki.<sup>165</sup>

The first tree I climbed was probably the pine on Harakka Island, which I sat in once a week during the year of the dog (2006–2007),<sup>166</sup> and that same year I also hung from the branch of a pine in Kalvola once a month.<sup>167</sup> I returned to this act of hanging during the project in Stockholm to see if it could be developed into an alternative to swinging as a continuation of my previous performances swinging in a small blue swing. To be able to generate a swinging movement by hanging from a branch without any extra apparatus (the swing attached to it), seemed like a simpler and more interesting action. The action of swinging in the pine rather than simply hanging in it seems like a rather violent, muscular action and a spectacular inter-

164 “The first attempts in Stockholm – Choosing the Trees” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316681>

165 “Where to begin in Helsinki” <https://annettearlander.com/2017/01/10/where-to-begin-in-helsinki/>

166 See *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) 8 min. 10 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-istun-puussa/>

167 See *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar* (2007) 8 min. 11 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-kalvolassa-kalenteri/>

vention in tree time,<sup>168</sup> while hanging, which necessarily involves some small movement as well, seems more attuned to the tree's mode of being. Both actions are dependent on collaboration, with the tree offering a suitably placed and strong-enough branch for the human to hold on to.

While performing landscape, I looked for actions that could be repeated in order to emphasize the cyclical nature of the repetition. Throughout this project, my main interest has been to explore ways to spend time with a tree, to participate in the life of the tree, to “be with” or explore “becoming with” a tree. This is, of course, nearly impossible for a person without special sensibilities, but by reducing one's activity – by calming down and trying to be still, by focusing on breathing – some kind of nearing is possible. Stillness assists in being more perceptive to the environment, not necessarily just the tree or stump one is sitting in or on but also the surrounding vegetation, the movement of the wind, the shifts in light, the insects and all the other occurrences in the environment. By focusing on one's breath, however, attention is sometimes withdrawn from the environment to one's own body and can make the session less of a meeting with the tree and more of an encounter with the self. This can be an important experience as such, even if counterproductive to the encounter. In terms of the image generated, these shifts rarely matter. The experiences while performing and the visual effect recorded by the camera can differ quite substantially.

I explored other actions to perform during the subsequent project, when meetings with trees included the yoga-derived action of “becoming a tree” or the two-legged tree pose. This action consists of simply standing, reaching up with one's arms

168 This term was used by Becky Hilton when discussing the work at a seminar in Stockholm.

extended and balancing on one's toes, an action I explored for the first time next to an old oak tree during a residency in Johannesburg from February to March 2020.<sup>169</sup> Since then I have continued practicing with several other trees, such as the maple tree in my home yard in Helsinki during the Covid lockdown in spring 2020,<sup>170</sup> the spruce of independence in Kaivopuisto park,<sup>171</sup> a small pine tree on Harakka Island,<sup>172</sup> with a birch in Mustarinda,<sup>173</sup> a pine in Örö,<sup>174</sup> a pine on Skifferholmen in Helsinki,<sup>175</sup>

- 169 Documentation of the process for *The Oak on Galway Road* (2020) 14 min. 47 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 13.2 and 16.3.2020. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/796954>
- 170 Documentation of the process for *With the Maple Tree (Corona Diary) – brief* (2020) 16 min. 50 sec. and *With the Maple Tree (Corona Diary)* (2020) 62 min. 22 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 29.3 and 31.5.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831532>
- 171 Documentation of the process for *June with the Spruce of Independence* (2020) 36 min. 31 sec. and 15 min., performed daily in June 2020 in Kaivopuisto Park, Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/917581>
- 172 Documentation of the process for *July with a Pine* (2020) 50. min. 46 sec. and 16 min., performed daily in July 2020 on Harakka Island, Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410>
- 173 Documentation of the process for *The Daily Birch (September in Mustarinda)* (2020) 60 min. 20 sec. and *The Daily Birch (September in Mustarinda) – brief* (2020) 14 min. 10 sec., performed daily near Mustarinda house in Paljakkavaara in September 2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/978491>
- 174 Documentation of the process for *The Pine's Apprentice* (2020) 53 min. and *The Pine's Apprentice (brief)* 13 min. 50 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 2.11. and 2.12.2020 on Örö Island <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1034899>
- 175 Documentation of the process for *The Pine on Skifferholmen II* (2021) 35 min. 38 sec. and *The Pine on Skifferholmen II (brief)* 20 min. 10 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 1 and 28.2.2021 on Skifferholmen Island in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1102386>

a pine on Hailuoto,<sup>176</sup> a crab apple and a maple tree in Eckerö<sup>177</sup> and finally with a ginkgo tree in Stockholm.<sup>178</sup>

Compared to the action of sitting in a tree or on a tree stump, the act of reaching up and balancing is physically demanding, a real “performance”, albeit in miniature. The main point is not the resemblance to or mimicry of a tree but rather the effort of reaching up and maintaining balance by centering oneself and focusing one’s gaze, an effort that is barely visible except as an occasional trembling. Doing this next to and with the tree can become an act of affection, an attempt at sharing the effort of the tree, as it were. At the very least, the action can serve as a reminder that trees do engage in constant balancing, which becomes very clear whenever a storm causes trees to fall, as the storm Alfrida did in Lill-Jansskogen in Stockholm in January 2019. Besides that, the pose emphasizes vertical movement in the image and juxtaposes the size of the human and the tree, regardless of whether the tree is huge, such as most of the trees in these examples, or relatively small in terms of human scale, such as the pines on Harakka and Skifferholmen.

A common characteristic for all of these actions or poses, with the exception of hanging and swinging, is that they are turned away from the camera; the human figure is seen from behind. The original

176 Documentation of the process for *Practicing with a Pine in Hailuoto (brief)* 25 min. 10 sec. (2021), comprised of performances repeated between 4. and 28.4.2021 in Keskikylä village on Hailuoto. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1219495>

177 Documentation of the process for *With the Maple Tree* (2021) 15 min. 10 sec. and *With the Apple Tree* (2021) 15 min. 10 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 3. and 30.7.2021 in Eckerö Post and Customs House on the Åland Islands <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1305636>

178 Documentation of the process for *Becoming Ginkgo – mini* (2021) 11 min. 30 sec., comprised of performances repeated between 4.8 and 11.12.2021 in David Bagares gata in Stockholm. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1318140>

reason for posing with my back to the camera was to depersonalize the performer, to perform as a human figure and not as myself, and to downplay the role of the human, to present the human figure as a shape, an element alongside the other elements in the image. A human seen from behind is nevertheless easily associated with German romantic landscape painting, especially the “Rückenfiguren” of C. D. Friedrich. While discussing Friedrich’s well-known painting from 1918, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer)*, Malcolm Andrews notes how the human figure is not a conduit into the scene, as a marginal shepherd might be in a picturesque landscape, but rather more of an impediment: “We cannot have the sublime experience open to the figure, mainly because of the very presence of that figure.”<sup>179</sup> In some sense, this is probably true of my poses as well, although the aim there is not to create an experience of the sublime. The mere presence of a human shifts attention from the tree and other elements in the image, which easily turn into a backdrop for the human performer. There is, however, the possibility that the human figure provides a point of identification for the viewer and serves as a conduit of sorts, helping the viewer to “settle down” with the tree. The balance in the relationship between the human figure and the tree is a topic of constant negotiation in these experiments.

179 Andrews 1999, 143.

## Costume



*Year of the Dog in Lill-Jans' Wood - On a Spruce stump 1-2 (2019) video still*

One way to adjust the balance between the human and the tree is with the color and type of clothing. The choice of costume is often a crucial element for performance artists when performing outdoors, either in trying to create a contrast to the environment, as with Catherine Bagnall and her elaborate dresses,<sup>180</sup> or in some manner merging with the surrounding, as with Gustaf Broms in his photo performances.<sup>181</sup> The strategies of “standing out from” or “merging with” the landscape I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>182</sup> Throughout *Performing with Plants*, my focus was in performing with the chosen trees. As in previous years, I used a scarf or shawl, which assists in simplifying the figure and in maintaining continuity. During the years of performing landscape on Harakka Island for the series that came to be called *Animal Years*, I wore a “scarf of the year” as a costume of sorts to create some consistency in the images. Sometimes, the same scarf served for two consecutive years,<sup>183</sup> and some years

180 Bagnall, Catherine 2016. “An Experience of Becoming: Wearing a Tail and Alpine Walking.”

181 Broms, Gustaf 2021. “Perforated Realities”, *Ruukku Journal* #16. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1235806/1235807>

182 See, for example, chapter 9.1. Performing with trees – Landscape and artistic research, in Arlander 2012, 244–253.

183 I wore, for example, dark blue for the year of the horse and year of the goat, red for the year of the monkey and the year of the rooster, and green for the year of

I looked for elements in the landscape to pose with that had the same color as the scarf.<sup>184</sup> When performing with junipers (during the year of the rabbit and the year of the dragon), I covered myself completely with the scarf, becoming a juniper-like shape next to the shrub. This was a special experience of hiding, being protected by the costume, that I have analyzed elsewhere.<sup>185</sup> Usually, however, I wore the scarves on my shoulders in an ordinary manner, as a costume or uniform, sometimes almost like a prop. Based on these experiences, it was natural to wear a scarf during my performances with trees in *Performing with Plants* as well.

The pale-pink scarf I used in most of the works made within the project was, on the one hand, reflective of my preferred “color of the year” from 2016–2017 – red – and, on the other hand, the result of a chance occurrence of finding an abandoned woollen scarf or poncho on the subway in Stockholm. I could and perhaps should have returned it to the lost-and-found but chose to look at the coincidence as a stroke of luck or even as providence and took the scarf as a gift from the city to use as my costume the following years. I used this same pale-pink woollen item as my costume for the time-lapse videos made with trees in Helsinki and Stockholm in 2017, in Stockholm in 2018 and 2019, as well as for the tree calendars created in Helsinki 2017 and in Stockholm 2018. The same scarf/poncho also travelled with me to my residency in Nida and to various tourist resorts. Sometimes, however, I used a lighter scarf of the same shade.<sup>186</sup> The pale-

the rabbit and year of the dragon.

184 For example, the rusty buoy and ring with the rust-colored scarf in the year of the ox, or the bird-droppings and the volcanic steam with the white scarf in year of the tiger.

185 See Arlander 2015a.

186 For example, in *Body with a Corpse* (2017) 11 min., performed 27.12.2016 and *Sitting with the Corpse* (2017) 5 min. 40 sec. performed 31.12.2016. on a beach in Khao Lak <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=328160> or *With a*



pink hue sometimes seems to resemble skin, but mostly it forms a soft contrast to the trees' and shrubs' various shades of green.

In some instances, such as in the daylong performances *The Tide in Kan Tiang* or *Grey Day in Rekdal*, I chose to wear my everyday clothes – in the latter, a dark red that contrasted nicely with the light-green meadow. The use of everyday clothing is perhaps most obvious in *Trees in Victoria*, in which I wear my ordinary black-and-white raingear. In 2018 and 2019, when my “color of the year” was yellow, I wore yellow scarves or yellowish clothes when performing with trees during my travels, using whatever clothes I had with me for some of the one-off sessions created in various cities,<sup>187</sup>

*Tamarisk in the Wind 1* (2017) 5 min. 27 sec., *With a Tamarisk in the Wind 2* (2017) 5 min. 47 sec., performed 15.4.2017 in Maspalomas, Gran Canaria, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=354392> and *With a Palm Tree* (2017) 6 min. 38 sec., performed 18.4.2017 in Maspalomas, Gran Canaria <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=355285>

- 187 These works include *With an Elder in Krakow* (2018) 2 min. 6 sec., a short impromptu visit to an elder tree in central Krakow 31.5.2018, with camera by Pilvi Porkola <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=477340>, *In Dalseong Park* (2018) performed 7.7.2018 in Dalseong Park in Daegu, Korea <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=488612>, *In the Lantern Tree* (2018) 14 min. 26 sec., performed 14.7.2018 next to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=490560>, *With a Linden Tree in Karlsruhe* (2018) 4 min. 15 sec., performed 7.10.2018 in the Schloss Park in Karlsruhe, Germany <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=515384>, *With a Ficus Tree in Puerto Calero* (2018) 6 min. 9 sec., and *With a Ficus Tree – testing* (2018) 3 min. 38 sec., performed 31.12.2018 in Puerto Calero on Lanzarote <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=551016>, *With an Alder on Seili – Soul Island* (2019) 5 min. 55 sec., and *With an Alder on Seili – Soul Island (mix)* (2019) 7 min. 10 sec., performed 14.6.2019 on Seili Island <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=646299>, *With a Yew in Dartington* (2019) 5 min. 10 sec., and *With a Yew in Dartington 1 & 2* (2019) 9 min. 10 sec., performed 22.6.2019 in Dartington hall, Devon, England <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=649501>, and *With a Plane Tree in Fuxing Park* (2019) 7 min. 27 sec., performed 14.7.2019 in Fuxing Park in Shanghai

emphasizing the diary-like everyday nature of those extra performances.

In some of the specific experiments made in the last year of the project (2019), such as the visit to Old Tjikko on Fulufjället,<sup>188</sup> the day spent with a juniper on Utö, or the series of poses with olive trees in Uldecona<sup>189</sup> and the Australian banyan trees in Alicante,<sup>190</sup> I chose to wear ordinary black clothes, rather than a scarf. With Old Tjikko, this was because some of the images were made with Camilla Bäckstrand, and black clothing was an easy way to unify the image. On Utö I continued with this choice, which made sense in terms of the pose, lying on the ground with my feet up, in order to mark that these works were actually the beginning of something new, as were the other experiments at the end of that year. In the following pro-

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=658766>

- 188 *Day with Old Tjikko 1* (2019) 17 min. 45 sec., *Day with Old Tjikko 2* (2019) 19 min. 35 sec., *Day with Old Tjikko* (2019) 3 min. 52 sec., and *Day with Old Tjikko a & b* (2019) 15 min. 44 sec., performed 14.5.2019 between 10:30 and 19:30 on Fulufjället, Sweden <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=635417>, *Day with a Juniper 1 and 2* (2019) à 21 min. 56 sec., *Day with a Juniper 2 (long)* (2019) 72 min. 20 sec. and *Day with a Juniper 2 (with text)* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., performed 3.8.2019 on Utö, Finland <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>
- 189 *Dear Olive Tree* (2019) 19 min., and *With an Olive Tree* (2019) 19 min., performed 19.12.2019 in La Foia d'Uldecona, Catalonia, Spain <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760758> and *With Olive Tree 765* (2019) 4 min. 50 sec., *With Olive Tree 767* (2019) 4 min. 29 sec., *With Olive Tree 770* (2019) 4 min. 3 sec., *With Olive Tree 1432 a* (2019) 4 min. 23 sec., *With Olive Tree 1432 b* (2019) 4 min. 17 sec., *With Olive Tree 2137* (2019) 4 min. 27 sec. and *With Olive Tree 4403* (2019) 5 min. 9 sec., performed 20.12.2019 at la Ermita del Remei in Alcanar, Catalonia, Spain <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760775>
- 190 *Dear Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019), 19 min. 30 sec., performed 25.12.2019 in the Parque de Canalejas in Alicante, Spain, *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II* (14 min. 13. sec) and *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II (mix)* (14 min. 35 sec.) performed 27.12.2019 in the Parque Gabriel Miró in Alicante, Spain <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>

ject, Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, I have not used any scarves and have chosen to dress in black for most of the performances, including the works made at residencies in Johannesburg, Mustarinda, Öró and elsewhere, with only a few exceptions to a conventional black “performance outfit”.<sup>191</sup>

Whereas a colored scarf can help the human figure become more like a shape, a lump of color in the image and to either stand out from the background or merge with it, depending on the hue,<sup>192</sup> a costume of black pants and black T-shirt with long sleeves is almost like a dancer’s leotard, making the shape of the body and its movements visible. Although not “neutral” in any way, such an outfit is a fairly graphic element in the landscape, resembling a silhouette and downplaying the individuality of the performer somewhat similarly to the scarf.

191 The only performances with other than black clothes (only in the last one the choice was deliberate) are *With a Sick Plane Tree* (2020) 7 min. 27 sec., <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=818726>, and *Reaching for the Pine* (2020) 3 min. 27 sec., performed 9.3.2020 in Rhodes Park, Johannesburg <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=818725> as well as *Dear Firethorne Rhus II* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec. and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)* (2020) 6 min., performed 19.3.2020 in Nirox Nature Reserve <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675>

192 Compare, for instance, the color of my outfit in *With an Elder in Krakow* (2018) 2 min. 6 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=477340> and in *With a Plane Tree in Fuxing Park* (2019) 7 min. 27 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=658766>

## Collaboration



*Performance with a Pine* (Öró 2.9.2021) video still

The most important collaborations take place with the trees as partners. Mostly, I have performed alone in a one-on-one relationship with a specific tree. If we include the camera as a witness, it is a relationship of three. In some cases, however, other collaborators have been important. In some instances, the location of the tree presents specific problems, for example if the site is such that leaving the camera alone on a tripod too far away or behind your back would not be a wise idea. Sometimes, I invited a colleague to look after the camera, once even to use the camera,<sup>193</sup> or then sat with the camera in view, like in Alicante. In Johannesburg I had an assistant with me who stood next to the camera while I sat in trees. Besides such choices based on the circumstances, there have been other types of collaborations, most notably the improvisation sessions “in

193 Pilvi Porkola filmed the elder tree in Krakow with my iPhone, because I did not have my camera with me; see *With an Elder in Krakow* (2018) 2 min. 6 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=477340>

the bushes” with dancer Kirsi Heimonen and the hike to visit Old Tjikko with Camilla Bäckstrand. In the following project, Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, I have experimented with other types of collaboration.

Moving in the bushes, in some sort of wasteland areas, was an experiment in collaboration with dancer Kirsi Heimonen, who has extensive experience with moving in strange places and is also interested in trees. I joined her with my camera for a few sessions, and we soon found a way to balance her like of wastelands and my fondness for trees. The rules we followed were simple: one of us chose the site, we met there, I placed the camera on the tripod and then we started moving, each on our own but aware of the other; we stopped when we'd had enough. Sometimes, I checked to make sure the camera was still operating during the session, but often I forgot it. And then, after the session, we exchanged a few words about the experience and went our own ways. I usually took some still images from the video and added them to a blog post with a short description of the time and place of the session, which I then invited Kirsi to add a comment to. The blog posts are all written in Finnish, but the images give an idea of our approach. They are all gathered on three pages in the project archive, one for the first experiments in 2016,<sup>194</sup> another for the sessions in 2017<sup>195</sup> and a third for our last experiments in 2018.<sup>196</sup> We found places to explore by moving in Central Park in Helsinki, on Tervasaari island, along Töölönlahti bay, on Mustikkamaa island, near Hietaniemi beach, in Sibelius Park and finally on the hill in Lin-

194 “The first attempts in Helsinki” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316682>

195 “Explorations in the bushes, with Kirsi Heimonen” 2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325194>

196 “Explorations in the bushes, with Kirsi Heimonen” 2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/421244>

nunlalu, most of which are quite near the city center. Besides the idea of moving freely, without a preplanned idea and without focusing on the image, the experience of working with somebody else – collaborating in a loose and open manner – was rewarding and inspiring.

These experiments were an important expansion towards movement and towards focusing on the experience rather than the image. Although the video material was rarely interesting and I have not considered editing it, the possibility to approach performance for the camera in a less deliberate and constructed manner, simply letting the camera record what happened to occur within view, was a liberating experience. Another expansion to my usual approach within the project was the choice of site, in these cases not according to individual trees or an interesting view but based on how unkempt or “wild” or perhaps “feral” the site was; mostly we looked for small slots of wasteland or undefined vegetation in the midst of the controlled urban environment. A third expansion was the idea of collaboration, as mentioned above: sharing the experience with another human being and allowing impulses from the other to influence what happens.

Another deliberate collaboration was a joint hike to Fulufjället with Camilla Bäckstrand. She contacted me as part of her studies and wanted to follow my practice in some manner, so I suggested that we spend a day with an interesting tree in Stockholm, Gothenburg or perhaps somewhere halfway in between. She suggested Old Tjikko, one of the oldest trees in the world, growing on Fulufjället in Dalarna, in the northwest of Sweden. I was rather intimidated at the thought but also excited, as I would never have thought of visiting that tree on my own. Thus, this idea of responding to an invitation to collaborate resulted in a completely new acquaintance, a celebrity among trees, Old Tjikko.

Traveling to the tree, finding a place to stay in the vicinity and then finding the tree on the mountain, off season, when the tracks

were hard to follow and the paths were covered with melting snow, was an endeavor in itself. And then spending the whole day on the mountain with the tree and with each other was rather different than my previous days with trees. We made our separate images, but we also entered the images together, and I had a vague idea that we could edit two split-screen versions combining our materials, though we never did. Camilla combined her footage with material of another tree in her yard, and I have edited the material with both of us and Old Tjikko, as well as the material with only me and the tree, and have shown only one of them so far.<sup>197</sup> The notes I wrote after each session in Swedish, which I planned to add to the video in my usual manner, I have not recorded and will probably not use as a voice-over after all.<sup>198</sup> The problem with collaboration, even when fruitful and relatively unproblematic, is the need to consider the views of your collaborators, which slows down the process and makes it less spontaneous. There are, however, unforeseen benefits, like the snapshot Camilla took of me lying on the ground, resting with my feet up, which gave me the impulse to try that position later, when performing with a juniper on Utö.<sup>199</sup>

Despite the importance of the contributions of Kirsi Heimonen and Camilla Bäckstrand, not to mention all the colleagues I met and had valuable comments from when presenting my work in various contexts, the most important collaborations developed almost accidentally within the following project, during my visit to Johan-

197 *Day with Old Tjikko 1* (17 min. 45 sec.) was shown at Gallery Forum Box 11.2–6.3.2022. See *Day with Old Tjikko* (2019), several durations <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=635417>

198 The notes are published in a blog post in Swedish, “En dag med världens äldsta träd” [A day with the oldest tree in the world] <https://annetearlander.com/2019/05/16/en-dag-med-ett-av-varldens-aldsta-trad/>

199 See image for *Day with a Juniper 1–2* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>

nesburg. There I invited colleagues and people I met at Wits University or through friends to introduce their favorite trees to me, first as a way of learning about all the strange trees in that new environment but soon in order to learn about the various interesting relationships people can have with trees. What was originally a way to find trees to meet turned into an almost journalistic strategy of interviewing people about their trees and even inviting them to perform with their trees. I have described this strategy in detail in the publication documenting my work at the Arts Research Africa residency,<sup>200</sup> and the trees and their presenters are also introduced on the project blog<sup>201</sup> and the archive on the RC.<sup>202</sup> When returning to Finland, I abandoned this way of working and considered it an adaptation to the specific circumstances in an unfamiliar context. The idea behind this kind of collaboration is nevertheless interesting, and later I tried to explore it further.<sup>203</sup>

Working with live events necessitates other forms of collaboration, and in 2021 I returned briefly to explore a type of participatory performance, which I had explored earlier<sup>204</sup>, now as a performance in two parts with a pine tree on Öro Island. In the first part I invited people to sit in a small swing attached to an old pine tree, video filmed them and edited the video to show a continuous movement. In the second part I projected the video on the same pine tree and tried to swing synchronized with the swinging in the image<sup>205</sup>.

200 *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg with Environs* (Arlander 2020d) <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/30395>

201 ARA <https://meetingswithtrees.com/ara/>

202 “Arts Research Africa – Trees” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/800342>

203 See, for example, “Hailuoto” <https://meetingswithtrees.com/hailuoto/> and “Trees in Hailuoto” <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1223364>

204 For a description of previous experiments, see Arlander 2018b.

205 The performance was part of the Öres 2021 exhibition on the island, with the first

Online collaboration, a form developed out of necessity during the Covid pandemic (2020-2021), resulted in many interesting experiments. I participated for example in a collective live art event called “Be-coming Tree”, where artists around the world performed at the same time via zoom.<sup>206</sup> In the first event, in August 2020, I performed together with the pine on Harakka Island<sup>207</sup>, in October I wrote a letter to a pine in Kaivopuisto Park<sup>208</sup>, in January 2021 I was “holding hands” with a pine on Örö Island<sup>209</sup> and in April I was swinging in a pine on Hailuoto<sup>210</sup>. The live moment online created an awareness of collaborating with other artists working with trees in different places on the planet. The contrast between performing for a live audience and for a camera, or for future viewers of a video work, was softened and blurred when performing for a live audience online. My minimalist actions were quite suitable to form one part of a larger weave of performances.

The main collaborators in the project have nevertheless been the trees and shrubs I have looked for and chosen, to whom I have responded by adjusting my position and the position of the camera, and with whom I have spent time trying to find a way to communicate with them – if not directly, at least by experiencing some form of momentary community or communion with them. The implications

part taking place on 26 June and the second part performed on 2 September 2021.

See documentation of both: <https://www.ores.fi/project/annette-arlander/>

<sup>206</sup> The artist-led initiative was facilitated by Jatun Risba, Danielle Imara and O Pen Be. See <https://becomingtree.live>

<sup>207</sup> See documentt on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410/483/195>

<sup>208</sup> See documentation on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544/1283/156>

<sup>209</sup> See documentation on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1107375/983/187>

<sup>210</sup> See documentation on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1219495/423/4442>

of considering trees your collaborators, your partners in performance, rather than your set or props or location or your surrounding circumstances – your environment – are truly vast, and I have barely begun to explore what it might mean to take that proposal seriously.

## Temporality and schedule



*Day with a Juniper (2019) video still*

Besides a specific relationship to place, plants also have a specific relationship to time. One way to approach vegetal temporality is with time-lapse videos. The project involved performing with specific trees for a year in order to create rough time-lapse videos, which means a rather special relationship to temporality. The durational aspect that is prominent in much of traditional performance art is here mostly realized in terms of repetition, rather than extended real-time duration. The performances were related to vegetal timeframes in their focus on cyclical planetary time, seasonal changes, growth and decay. Rather than working directly with vegetal growth as material or making biological processes understandable with the help of technology, the project explored everyday forms of embodied action with trees and shrubs in the places where they grow. The resulting video works can be positioned at the intersection of performance art, media art and video and environmental art, in the encounter of traditions with regard to time – performance art’s emphasis on embodied presence in the

here and now, video and media art's valuing of loops, repetition and technologically produced transformation, and environmental art's sensitivity to the possible effects and side-effects an artwork can have. The temporality involved in the actual practice is relevant with regard to efforts to relate to plants, of being with them and trying to share their mode of being at some level.

As mentioned before, during the project I made repeated visits to two trees in Helsinki and Stockholm in 2017, four trees in a small wood in the center of Stockholm in 2018 and one more tree in Stockholm in 2019, performing for a camera on a tripod. The visits to Lill-Jansskogen (Little-Jan's Wood) between the campuses of the Royal Institute of Technology and Stockholm University, in the Chinese year of the dog (16 February 2018 – 3 February 2019), formed the core of the project and can serve as examples of the method used in terms of time. In that wood, I visited two spruce stumps and two pine trees, sometimes three times a week (100 times in all). The performances were recorded and later edited into rough time-lapse videos. My practice consisted of a round in the woods. First, I sat relatively close to the camera on an old spruce stump with the felled trunk still attached to it. Then I sat farther from the camera on a small spruce stump situated among tall spruce trees. Thirdly, I swung from the branch of a pine tree and then hung from it in order to create a continuous movement. And, fourthly, 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, I was inevitably performing for passersby as well; the wood is frequented by people running, jogging and walking their dogs. Dogs especially were interested in my unusual behavior. Thus, each performance included a real-time dimension in the here and now.

The purpose of these repeated visits was to explore how one might perform with trees while respecting their own sense of time, visit-

ing them in their own places. One of the original reasons to return to the same site again and again and to work with rough time-lapse videos was to show how the landscape changes constantly. Another reason was the cyclical temporality of nonstop loops in video installations. The idea of recording vegetal growth and decay to accentuate the seasons came later. The repeated performances or still-acts are recorded with the same framing in order to be edited into rough time-lapse videos. Removing the entering and exiting from the image while editing the material creates the impression of a continuous action or pose. The time thus created in the video and the time experienced while performing are quite different, and both of these temporalities are probably very unlike vegetal time, however that is understood. At some point, I imagined trees to be slower than humans and thought of sitting for five minutes in a tree as the equivalent of a handshake of sorts. Later, I learned that many plants react very quickly to insects attacking them, for example. In any case, spending time with plants, even with tree stumps, makes one aware of variations in temporality.

In comparison with these works based on repetition and editing, experiments with single performances with specific trees in specific places – like some experiments while traveling or the sessions performed for the tree calendars in Helsinki and Stockholm – exemplify a very different approach to temporality. Such sessions, which have usually varied between a few minutes to twenty minutes (simply because that is the maximum time my current camera can record video footage), are not only recorded but also edited to display “real time”. They often seem extremely static, almost like still images, because moving images are usually cut and edited to change at a very swift pace. In order to really emphasize duration, such sessions should actually be much longer, but if shown as installations, where the viewer just passes by, the idea is conveyed in a shorter amount of time. Sometimes, I tried combining one real-time session and a

time-lapse video with the same tree, such as with a small downy birch in Rekdal in Lofoten.<sup>211</sup>

Combining several images within one frame is another mode of repetition with variation, which can be used for layering time as well, as when inserting images of the place recorded earlier into a recent image of the same place. This technique was developed for another project, the Academy of Finland-funded research project *How to Do Things with Performance* (with Hanna Järvinen, Tero Nauha and Pilvi Porkola), for which I revisited the sites of the *Animal Years* on Harakka Island and created video essays based on compilations by inserting old videos into the newly recorded material from the same site. Because trees sometimes figure as crucial parts of the landscapes recorded in *Animal Years*, such as the pine in 2006,<sup>212</sup> the spruce in 2008,<sup>213</sup> the juniper in 2011<sup>214</sup> and the aspen tree in 2014,<sup>215</sup> they play a central role in some of the revisits as well. These compilations combine the real time of the recent recording, the time-lapse

211 *Rainy Day in Rekdal* and *Grey Day in Rekdal* (2017), two-channel installation (15 min. 20 sec.) <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/rainy-day-in-rekdal-grey-day-in-rekdal/>

212 *The Pine Revisited* (2018) 16 min. 36 sec., with *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) and *Day and Night of the Dog* (2007) inserted into the recording of a revisit on 28 February 2018 to the site where they were recorded in 2006–2007 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=452458>

213 *The Spruce Revisited 1* (2018) 28 min. 50 sec. and *The Spruce Revisited 2* (2018) 28 min. 48 sec., with *Under the Spruce I–III* (2008) inserted into two recordings made on 7 and 9 August 2018 on the same site, albeit from different perspectives <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=521487>

214 *Revisiting the Juniper* (2019) 21 min. 50 sec., with *Year of the Rabbit – By the Bird Shed*, *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper* and *Day and Night of the Rabbit – In the Year of the Dragon* inserted in the recording of a revisit, on 1.8.2019, to the site where these videos were performed in 2011–2012 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662339>

215 *Revisiting the Aspen Tree* (2020) 40 min., with *Year of the Snake* and *Day and Night of the Snake* inserted into a revisit on 4 February 2020 to the site where those videos were recorded in 2014 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=834268>

video of one year and often the time-lapse video of one day and night on the same site, in temporal layers of sorts.

### *A year*



*With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1-2* (2018) video still

Creating rough year-long time-lapse videos has been my preferred technique for many years, and it was also the main mode of working during the project. My first videos using that technique – that is, repeating the same framing of the image in order to show the changes taking place in the view – I made at a monastery on Mount Randa on Mallorca in October 2001, at first as a diary of sorts, prompted by the continually shifting weather. There I entered the image myself in order to show the movement of the wind.<sup>216</sup> Later, on Harakka Island, I made some related experiments and the first full year, *Year of the Horse*, 2002–2003, repeating the same image approximately once a week. This basic schedule, once a week for a year (either an ordinary calendar year or the lunar year of the Chinese calendar), I used for all twelve years in the series *Animal Years*,<sup>217</sup> and that was also my first choice for performing with plants.

216 I have described the work in detail in an article for the first issue of *Ruukku* (Arlander 2013b).

217 See the compilations in the Finnish media archive *Animal Years I* (2003–2009) 86 min. 47 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-years-i/> and *Animal Years II* (2010–2014) 85 min. 22 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-years-ii/>

The first tree that I performed with was a birch (*Betula pendula*) in Koivumäki, Kalvola, which had a special outgrowth on its trunk near the ground, like a seat, in 2005. On that birch, I sat once a week for a year.<sup>218</sup> The first trees I performed with on Harakka Island the following year were two pine trees, one tall one I could sit in, in the southern part of the island,<sup>219</sup> and a smaller one on the rocks on the western shore that I could lie next to.<sup>220</sup> That same year I also visited an old pine tree in Koivumäki once a month.<sup>221</sup> By focusing on pine trees or Scots pines (*Pinus sylvestris*), I came to acquaint myself with their similarities as a species and to appreciate these individual pine trees, each with their specificities due to their location. Following this interest in pines, I chose other trees to work with on the island during the following years, such as the spruce<sup>222</sup>

- 218 *Sitting on a Birch* (2006) 24 min. 15 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/istun-koivulla/>, which I used to celebrate my fiftieth year, was performed with *Secret Garden 1&2* (2006) 24 min. 14. sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/salainen-puutarha-1-2/> between 22.5.2005 and 14.5.2006, traveling to Koivumäki on Sundays, parallel to *Year of the Rooster* (2006) 31 min. 37 sec. performed on Harakka Island between 8.1.2005 and 31.12.2005 <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/kukon-vuosi/>
- 219 *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) 8 min. 10 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-istun-puussa/> was performed between 7.1.2006 and 11.2.2007 in a pine tree in the southern part of Harakka Island.
- 220 *Shadow of a Pine I and II* (2007) 16 min. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/mannyn-varjo-i-mannyn-varjo-ii/> and *Shadow of a Pine I–IV* (2007) 16 min. 9 sec., <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/mannyn-varjo-i-ii-iii-iv/> were performed on the same occasions, 51 times, approximately once a week 7.11.2006 – 11.2.2007. I lie with a yellowish scarf on my shoulders on the rock under a pine tree on the western shore of Harakka Island in parts I and III with the camera directed towards the city in the north, in part II and IV with the camera directed towards the sea in the south.
- 221 *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar* (2007) 8 min. 11 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuosi-kalvolassa-kalenteri/> was performed twelve times, once a month in 2006 (with the exception of April, which was made in 2007) by hanging from and leaning against an old pine tree in Kalvola.
- 222 *Under the Spruce I–III* (2008) 28 min. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/under-the->

growing in the center of the island and a juniper<sup>223</sup> in the southern part a few years later. I looked for junipers and worked with them in other places too, and they became important collaborators.<sup>224</sup> My first choices were all coniferous trees, probably because they remain green all year. Although treated as individuals and befriended, these trees on Harakka Island were part of my efforts to perform landscape for *Animal Years*, a series of video works named after the animals in the Chinese calendar. The last tree I performed with for that series was an aspen tree growing on the western shore that I attached a small swing to<sup>225</sup> but which I did not really focus on and almost neglected as a collaborator.<sup>226</sup>

- spruce-i-iii/ was performed sitting under the only spruce tree on Harakka Island once a week for a year between 6.1.2007 and 3.2.2008, and recorded from three perspectives: the hill, the path and from underneath the tree.
- 223 *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper* (2012) 20 min. 10. sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/year-of-the-rabbit-with-a-juniper/> was performed with a juniper growing on the southeastern shore of Harakka Island on Sundays at 3 pm between 6.2.2011 and 22.1.2012.
- 224 Works with junipers include *Becoming Juniper – Kalvola* (2012) 16 min. 50 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/becoming-juniper-kalvola/>, *Becoming Juniper – Kõkar* (2012) 30 min. 42 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/becoming-juniper-kokar/>, *Becoming Juniper – Rovaniemi* (2012) 37 min. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/becoming-juniper-rovaniemi/>, *Holding Hands with Junipers – Ibiza* (2012) 15 min. 6 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/holding-hands-with-junipers-ibiza/> and more.
- 225 *Year of the Snake – In the Swing* (2014) 16 min. 8 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/year-of-the-snake-in-the-swing/> and *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (2014) 26 min. 30 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-along/> were performed in a swing attached to an aspen on the western shore of Harakka Island approximately once a week between 10.2.2013 and 28.1.2014. In the latter, people visiting or working on Harakka Island were invited to sit for a while in the swing.
- 226 I have discussed this in several texts (Arlander 2014a, Arlander 2018a).



These first trees were considered part of the landscape and not the main co-performers or partners, perhaps with the exception of the junipers, which I “held hands” with or tried “becoming” with. The simple act of visiting a tree regularly for a year, however, makes that tree very special, an individual and a friend. Besides the above-mentioned trees that I visited for a year (the birch and the pine in Kalvola, the two pines, the spruce, the juniper and the aspen on Harakka Island) as part of *Performing Landscape*, I made year-long performances with several trees during *Performing with Plants*. The trees I visited for a year in Helsinki were a group of elm trees and an alder stump in Kaivopuisto park. In Stockholm, I visited a sycamore in Humlegården and a beech (or hornbeam) in Djurgården (2017), two pine trees and two spruce stumps in Lill-Jansskogen (2018) and lastly a Tatarian maple in Nobelparken (2019).

In 2017, I worked within the calendar year, and instead of weekly visits I performed with the trees in Helsinki approximately three times a week and with the trees in Stockholm less regularly, approximately twice a month. The schedule in Helsinki was fairly regular, while the performances in Stockholm took place in clusters during my visits, such as one afternoon and the following morning, followed by a two- or three-week pause. These pauses or jumps create sudden changes in the environment in the video, unlike the more continuous changes produced by regular visits. A sudden snowfall or storm, however, can change the image completely overnight. The added value of more frequent visits, three times a week rather than once a week, for example, was not as evident as I had imagined.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, I could visit the trees in Stockholm regularly and chose to return to the Chinese calendar for my schedule. Due to various travels, I usually visited the trees when in town and managed to gather 100 visits to the two pine trees and two spruce stumps in Lill-Jansskogen during the year of the dog (16

February 2018 – 4 February 2019) and 108 visits to the Tatarian maple in Nobelparken near Strandvägen during the year of the pig (4 February 2019 – 24 January 2020). This last year (2019-2020) I was already aware of the limitations involved in using the year as the timespan. By beginning and ending in wintertime, a specific type of seasonal narrative dominates, with the slow approach of spring, blossoming in summer, the inevitable decay of autumn and a return to winter. While this kind of narrative can be comforting and reassuring in its cyclical rhythm as a contrast to human existence, which is a more linear trajectory from birth to death,<sup>227</sup> the attention of the viewer is focused on seasonal changes rather than the tree. At the end of the project, I realized I had reached a saturation point of sorts in terms of year-long time-lapse videos with trees and that there was no need to create additional year-long visits; this does not mean I stopped befriending individual trees or even visiting them regularly. Rather, I planned to explore other schedules, such as a day and night or just a day.

<sup>227</sup> I have discussed the various time conceptions involved in “*Performing Landscape for Years*” (Arlander 2014b) and the performance with this particular tree in “*Beyond the Saturation Point – Bortom Mättnadspunkten*” (Arlander 2021b).

## A day



*Day and Night with a Mountain Birch (2019) video still*

In terms of planetary cycles, day and night is a recurring cycle comparable to a year. As a complement to *Animal Years*, I made *Animal Days and Nights* by returning to a site every two hours or every three hours for a day and night.<sup>228</sup> The day and night recorded for each year had been part of that series as a counterpoint to the year, another planetary cycle. The main point was mostly the cycle itself and it was an exercise in endurance, with intervals of two or three hours inserted to be able to rest a little in between the sessions. This was the format in *Day and Night of the Dog*, in which I sat in a pine tree through a rainy day and night in autumn. Based on these experiences, I developed the format of spending a day with a tree, turning the focus to the encounter. The days spent with trees have begun at sunrise or later and ended at sunset or even before, often

228 *Animal Days and Nights I (2003–2009)* 56 min. 17 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-days-and-nights-i-2003-2009/> and *Animal Days and Nights II (2010–2014)* 55 min. 29 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-days-and-nights-ii-2010-2014/>

recorded every hour and therefore revealing subtler shifts in light and weather.

Besides sessions of recording twenty-four hours in the same place at two- or three-hour intervals,<sup>229</sup> a performance that necessitates some preparation and suitable circumstances, I had already made some experiments with recording for a day every hour from morning to night. The first experiment of this kind was with a tree growing in a rocky bay with a strong tide in Kan Tiang on Koh Lanta, Thailand (26.12.2015), the species of which I never found out. It stood alone in the center of the cove, seemingly out in the sea during high tide, and my main interest in performing with it was actually recording the tide.<sup>230</sup> The tree evoked my sympathy standing there alone, but it also served as a support, something to cling on to if the tide was strong – it was not very high, actually. I spent the whole day in the cove, recording an image every hour, but I did not make any notes.<sup>231</sup> This first experiment was more concerned with the tide than the tree, although the slender tree growing in the bay, at times appearing as if rising straight out of the sea, served as the impulse for the work. A companion piece to this work created during a brief visit to Lofoten in Norway (20.7.2017) also focused on the tide, at least to begin with, although the tide is not really visible in the final work. I made a test with a small downy birch growing in a meadow on the shore of Rekdal the previous day, in heavy rain; the videos created on two consecutive days – a real-time session

229 See the compilations in the Finnish media archive, *Animal Days and Nights I (2003–2009)* 56 min. 17 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-days-and-nights-i-2003-2009/> and *Animal Days and Nights II (2010–2014)* 55 min. 29 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/animal-days-and-nights-ii-2010-2014/>

230 The work was called *The Tide in Kan Tiang* <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/the-tide-in-kan-tiang/>

231 Later I described the process in several texts (Arlander 2019b, Arlander 2018b).

in which the raindrops cover the lens and a day with minuscule changes recorded every hour – form a two-channel installation.<sup>232</sup> Because the birch was growing right next to the house where I was staying, I could return indoors to write notes after each session. These texts I later recorded and added as a voiceover to the video. This principle of video-recording a moment with the tree every hour, writing notes, reading and recording the notes and adding them as sound to the video is something I have used in most subsequent days spent with trees.

I have used the same technique in several other contexts: with a pine tree in Nida on the Curonian spit (24.9.2017); with Old Tjikko on Fulufjället (14.5.2019); with a juniper on Utö, Finland (3.8.2019); with a firethorn rhus in Nirox sculpture park near Johannesburg in South Africa (17.3.2020); with a small birch in a bog in Mustarinda, Hyrynsalmi, in northeastern Finland (23.9.2020); with two pine trees on Örö in the southern archipelago (13.11.2020 and 28.11.2020); with a mountain birch in Kilpisjärvi (6.6.2021); and with an ash tree on the shore in Eckerö (22.7.2021).

In contrast to the small trees by the shore in Kan Tiang and in Rekdal that I could stand next to and hold on to, performing together with as if with a partner, the pine tree in Nida on the Curonian Spit I chose to spend a day with was tall and strong enough for me to sit in. It was one of several fairly similar pine trees that I had already tried to perform with, growing high up on the dunes but close enough for me to walk back and forth between the pine on the hill and my studio. I did not spend the whole day next to the tree but walked back and forth between my room and the tree every second hour. I also made notes in a blog post after every session,

232 *Rainy Day in Rekdal – Grey Day in Rekdal* <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/rainy-day-in-rekdal-grey-day-in-rekdal/> See also (Arlander 2019e).

then later recorded and added them as a voiceover to the edited video.<sup>233</sup> Unlike in Rekdal, I did not leave my tripod or camera on site but had to mark the spot well in order to recreate the framing every time. *Sunday with a Pine*<sup>234</sup> was only one of my experiments with pines in Nida,<sup>235</sup> but it was the only one adhering to the format of video recording over the course of a day and later adding my notes as voiceover. Paradoxically, this experiment, which I decided to make only when about to leave and which I felt was only “repeating old stuff”, is a work I have shown relatively often and have used as a model for later meetings with trees. Elsewhere, I have not had to walk as far between my base and the tree as in Nida, and during most other days with trees I have been in a sufficiently protected area to leave the camera and tripod on site, which makes the framing much easier to maintain.

The ancient spruce Old Tjikko on Fulufjället in Dalarna, Sweden, is clearly the most prominent and remarkable of all the trees I have spent time with so far. The tree was suggested to me by Camilla Bäckstrand, and we spent a day with the tree together. Getting to the tree growing on the mountain in the off season was not an easy matter. We spent a sunny day on the snowy mountain next to the spruce, although walking there and back from the nearest village made the day shorter than planned.<sup>236</sup> The experience was special

233 In “Performing with Trees and the Tide – A Diffractive Reading”, I describe and compare my experiences from Kan Tiang and Rekdal (Arlander 2019b).

In “Resting with Pines in Nida – attempts at performing with plants” (Arlander 2019a) I describe my Sunday with the pine tree in Nida.

234 See *Sunday with a Pine* on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=410375>

235 For a discussion of working with the pines in Nida, see (Arlander 2019a).

236 See the blog post “Meetings with remarkable trees – Old Tjikko” <https://annettearlander.com/2019/05/16/meetings-with-remarkable-trees-old-tjikko/> and “Visiting Old Tjikko on Fulufjället” <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/>

because we were settled next to it for a day, rather than returning to it every hour, although the video recording was repeated hourly. The spruce is one of the oldest trees in the world – 9,950 years old, according to carbon dating – albeit a clone and rather unremarkable in its appearance, despite being truly remarkable in terms of age. This visit to Old Tjikko, made as part of *Performing with Plants*, was the starting point for a new project, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*,<sup>237</sup> and became a sort of emblem for it. By being unremarkable in appearance and truly remarkable in age and importance, with its identity and name the spruce was a perfect example of the individuality of trees.

A small juniper on Utö, the next tree or shrub I chose to spend a day with, was a complete contrast to spruce celebrity Old Tjikko, and I went to look for it because I remembered the low-growing shrubs on the island from a childhood visit.<sup>238</sup> The juniper I performed with was growing on the small hill right next to the harbor and my accommodation; it was easy to keep an eye on the camera left standing on the hill for a day. The shrub was small, clearly quite unremarkable, and prompted me to sit next to it, as well as to lie on the ground with my feet up next to it. There I experimented with writing notes by hand after each recording session and returned indoors only when the evening grew cold.<sup>239</sup> The video material was edited into a two-channel installation and a single-channel version

[com/2019/05/16/visiting-old-tjikko-on-fulufjallet/](https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912)

237 See project blog *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* <https://meetingswithtrees.com> and the project archive on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/761327>

238 See brief description in Swedish in the blog post “Utflykt till Utö” <https://annetearlander.com/2019/08/04/utflykt-till-uto/>

239 See blogpost “A Day with a Juniper” <https://annetearlander.com/2019/08/04/a-day-with-a-juniper/>

with the text.<sup>240</sup> Lying on the ground was something new and therefore interesting to me, although the version with text, sitting next to the shrub, was the one first shown publicly.<sup>241</sup>

At the end of my Arts Research Africa residency at Wits university in Johannesburg, I had the opportunity to spend a few days in Nirox Sculpture Park and took advantage of the protected environment to spend a day recording with a tree. Among all the beautiful trees in the sculpture park, a small tree, or rather two intertwined trees, at the back of the park caught my attention, and I decided to spend a day with them.<sup>242</sup> Later, I learned that it was a firethorn rhus (*Searsia pyroides*), a native tree for the area, and I performed with two of its relatives as well, one inside the park<sup>243</sup> and one in the bushveld or savannah nearby.<sup>244</sup> The day was grey, and the changes in light are almost imperceptible on the video; only the last image at 6 pm, before the storm broke out, is darker. I went to stand next to the trees, continuing their entwinement, as it were, pointing out their sculptural form. Every artist at the Nirox residence is supposed to leave a work to add to the collection, and I wanted to join the magnificent sculptures in the park by pointing at this beautiful little tree.

240 See *Day with a Juniper 1-2* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., *Day with a Juniper 2 (long)* (2019) 72 min. 20 sec. and *Day with a Juniper 2 (with text)* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., performed 3.8.2019 between 7 am and 9 pm on Utö, Finland <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>

241 *Day with a Juniper 2 (with text)* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec., was shown as part of Video Weeks at gallery Sinne 21–26.2020.

242 See *Day with the Firethorn Rhus* (2020) 24 min. 10 sec. and 51 min. 30 sec., performed 17.3.2020 between 7 am and 6 pm in Nirox Sculpture Park <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433>

243 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec. and *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)* (2020) 6 min. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813>

244 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus II* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec. and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)* (2020) 6 min. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675>

In order to continue this series of days with trees, I chose a small birch in a bog near the Mustarinda house in Hyrynsalmi, Kainuu, where I did a residency in September 2020. The small birch reminded me of the downy birch in Rekdal and seemed small enough to stand with. Growing near the footpath on the bog, it was easy to reach and, because of the open bog, also easy to “isolate” in the frame. The magnificent old-growth forest around the area is not so easy to perform with for the camera if you want to focus on individual trees. Because I had made a small, one-time-only performance with the birch<sup>245</sup> and noticed it was a nice co-performer, I decided to select the birch as my companion when performing for a day.<sup>246</sup> The day I spent with the birch was cloudy and, despite a brief moment of sun in the morning, there were very little changes in the light during the day. Therefore, I made one more performance with the same birch on another evening, hoping for a little bit of sun, as a companion piece to the day,<sup>247</sup> potentially to be combined as a two-channel installation.

The notes written between the sessions are an important part of these days with individual trees, both in terms of the experience and as an important part of the edited video, as discussed in the section on the use of text. The main element of hazard is nevertheless the weather, because changes in light conditions make the video visually interesting, and if they are minimal the video becomes rather dull. The tree itself does not really change visibly

245 *With the Bog Birch* (2020) 15 min. and *With a Bog Birch (mix)* (2020) 15 min., performed 14.9.2020 in Mustarinda <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=989506>

246 See *Day with a Bog Birch - with text* (2020) 20 min. 1 sec. and *Day with a Bog Birch* (2020) 52 min. 17 sec., performed 23.9.2020 between 7 am and 7 pm in Mustarinda, Hyrynsalmi <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=999356>

247 *Standing with a Bog Birch* (2020) 20 min., performed 25.9.2020 in Mustarinda, Hyrynsalmi <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1001232>

in one day unless all leaves were to suddenly fall. Following the tree for one day nevertheless makes one aware of many small details and helps in understanding the sensitivity of trees with regard to their surroundings.

The added value of these recorded days compared with the effort involved in returning to the tree for a year includes, somewhat paradoxically, a stronger focus on the tree, a more concentrated experience and the greater coherence of the written notes. The very special relationship to the tree that a year-long process produces is not necessarily transmitted to the viewer of the video. The more concentrated timespan of one day is easier to edit into screening length and is probably easier for the viewer to “consume” and perhaps to identify with. The role of the text is of course important, as are the circumstances, such as the weather on that particular day. To put it simply, one could say that creating the year-long time-lapse videos is more relaxing and healing as an experience for the performer, and in that sense more useful as a practice, while the concentrated effort of sharing one day with a tree or shrub is more exhausting, more like a traditional performance, but it is also a more “cost-effective” way of producing artistic output. I warmly recommend spending a year visiting a tree, but I have to admit that after a few years, that can become a habit like any other, and at that point it is time to explore something else, such as a day with a tree.

*Daily for a month*

*With the Oak on Galway Road* (2020) video still

A kind of compromise or middle way, which in some sense combines the benefits of the year and the day, is a month of daily visits, something I have explored as part of my meetings with trees only after finishing *Performing with Plants*. Throughout *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, I have experimented with daily visits to specific trees for a month or more in various residences. Most of these experiments are related to the yoga practice “becoming a tree”, reaching up and balancing on your toes, which I have done with or next to certain trees. The first tree I performed with in this manner was an old oak in the yard of the bed and breakfast where I stayed in Johannesburg, a huge English oak spreading its branches above the roofs and fences. I performed with it daily for the duration of my stay.<sup>248</sup> The idea of a month actually developed

248 Between 13 February and 16 March 2020, see *With the Oak on Galway Road* (2020) 14 min. 47 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=824645>

through various intermediate stages, beginning with a daily practice with the oak in the yard in Johannesburg for little more than a month. When this practice was interrupted because of Covid-19, requiring me to return home, I decided to continue with the tree nearest to me during quarantine, without any specific timespan in mind. The end of the lockdown seemed like a good ending, especially since the maple tree I performed with had full-grown leaves by then. Thus, my second month with a tree, a maple in my home yard during Covid-19 quarantine, was actually more than two months.<sup>249</sup>

To commit to visiting a tree every day for a month is possible, and a month is a long enough period for creating a practice with some relevance to the performer. Within one month, there can be noticeable vegetative changes, especially during the spring and autumn months, as well as astonishing shifts in the weather. A month can be a visually static timespan too, as I experienced, for example, when performing in June with the Spruce of Independence in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki,<sup>250</sup> my first deliberately chosen month, soon followed by a month with a pine.<sup>251</sup> Later, I performed daily for the month of September 2020 with a birch outside the Mustarinda house in Hyrynsalmi in northeastern Finland,<sup>252</sup> in

249 See *With the Maple Tree (Corona Diary) – brief* (2020) 16 min. 50 sec., and *With the Maple Tree (Corona Diary)* (2020) 62 min. 22 sec., performed with a maple tree in the yard of Tehtaankatu 18 in Helsinki daily between 29.3 and 31.5.2020. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=925459>

250 See *June with the Spruce of Independence* (2020) 15 min. or 36 min. 31 sec., performed daily in June 2020 with the Spruce of Independence in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=944114>

251 See *July with a Pine* (2020) 16 min. or 50 min. 46 sec., performed daily in July 2020 with a pine tree on Harakka Island in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=960090>

252 See *The Daily Birch (September in Mustarinda)* (2020) 60 min. 20 sec. and *The Daily Birch (September in Mustarinda) – brief* (2020) 14 min. 10 sec. performed daily from

November 2020 with a pine outside the residency house on Örö,<sup>253</sup> in January and February 2021 with small pines on Skifferholmen,<sup>254</sup> in March with a sea-buckthorn,<sup>255</sup> with a pine again on Hailuoto in April 2021<sup>256</sup> and with a maple and crab apple at the Eckerö Post & Customs House in July 2021.

The only officially remarkable tree among these is “Itsenäisyyden kuusi”, the Spruce of Independence, which is a national monument of sorts, grown from seed upon the declaration of independence in 1917 and planted in Kaivopuisto Park in 1931. Later campaigns in 1967, 1987 and 2017 to celebrate 50, 70 and 100 years of independence have distributed seedlings from the spruce all over the country.<sup>257</sup> There is a monument next to the tree with the proverb “Sitä kuusta kuuleminen jonka juurella asunto” (“you should listen to the spruce under which you have your dwelling”), a piece of advice that continues to be relevant. There seems to be some controversy around the Spruce of Independence today, it is a reminder of the national-

2.-30.9.2020 with a birch in Mustarinda <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1005492>

253 See *The Pine's Apprentice* (2020) 53 min. or 13. min. 50 sec. performed daily between 2.11. and 2.12.2020 with a pine on Örö <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1073481>.

254 See *With a Pine on Skifferholmen* (2021) 66 min. 55 sec. and 23 min. 11 sec. performed daily between 1-31.1.2021 and *With a Pine on Skifferholmen II* 35 min. 38 sec. or 20 min. 10 sec. performed daily between 1-28.2.2021 with pines on Skifferholmen in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1102386>

255 See *Monument in March* (2021) 122 min. 20 sec. or 31 min. 10 sec., performed daily between 1-31.3.2021 with a protected sea-buckthorn in Ursininkallio Park in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1174139>

256 See *Practicing with a Pine in Hailuoto* (2021), performed daily between 4.-28.4.2021 with a pine in Kesikylä village on Hailuoto <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1219495>

257 Information on the internet regarding this is mainly in Finnish [https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Itsenäisyyden\\_kuusi](https://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Itsenäisyyden_kuusi)

istic and somewhat anachronistic sentiments of the past. I chose a camera position where I could get as much of the spruce within the frame uncovered by other trees and decided to disregard the monument, unwilling to support any overtly nationalist agenda or to dig any deeper into the history of the tree and the symbolism attached to it, wanting to simply acknowledge its presence as a living organism leading its life there all these years.

The practice of performing daily for a month with a tree is very different as an experience, compared to weekly visits for a year, partly due to the intensified recurring of encounters and partly due to the intensified bodily action in these cases. Rather than sitting in or on a tree – resting for a moment – the practice of “becoming a tree” involves effort and concentration, and rather than physical contact with the tree, which can be comforting and important, this practice is an embodied activity next to the tree, with a focus on one’s own body. For the viewer, the time-lapse videos created of these shorter periods of performance produce a somewhat different experience as well, because there are no cyclical seasonal changes, only the small daily shifts in weather and light conditions. Only the maple tree in the yard in Helsinki and the birch in Mustarinda undergo any visible change during the period of performing, because of the leafing in springtime and the falling of the leaves in autumn. The spruce in June and the pine in July stay as they are for the month of performances. In these daily rituals, the action – in most cases, practicing the two-legged tree pose – is as important as the tree partner and the schedule. And it is the everyday nature, the daily ritual, that is the distinguishing characteristic, rather than the duration of one month.

*Once*

By *Lake Ibirapuera* (2017) video still

Besides the above-mentioned schedules of a year, (once a week, three times a week or when possible) a day or a day and night (every hour or every two or three hours), and daily (for a month, two months or some other timespan), there is, of course, the easiest and most common schedule: once. Although I have tended to emphasize the year-long time-lapse videos and to see them as my main practice, most of the trees I have encountered I have performed only one session with. Most of these still-acts with trees have not been shown anywhere other than online, and many of them are more like notes rather than proper video works. Most of them are made in tourist resorts or at the end of conference trips, and they form a large part of the videos collected in the project archive on Research Catalogue.<sup>258</sup>

258 See “Other Experiments” 2016 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/323054>, “Other Experiments” 2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/354391>, “Other experiments” 2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410497> and “Other Experiments” 2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550280>

Before beginning the actual project, however, I explored repetition on tourist trips of limited duration in ways allowed by such a time constraint. One solution was standing next to each individual in a row of fir trees in Apollo Bay in Victoria, Australia, and a few days later with a row of similar trees in Lorne,<sup>259</sup> as discussed in the context of framing. A repetition that could not be accomplished by returning to the same tree again and again could be approximated by returning to fairly similar trees one after the other. The poses next to the trees were augmented by close-ups of the bark of those trees, to be edited into two two-channel videos, later combined to split-screen versions as well. Besides the seriality produced by repetition with variation, this repeated juxtaposition of two scales or distances increases the effect of the repetition and invites the viewer to pay attention to the minuscule variations.

Spending some time with a single tree, even if only once, can be an interesting experience. Some experiments were made during holiday trips in tourist resorts, where I was actively searching for some interesting trees to perform with. In most cases, the process of finding and choosing the tree to perform with is the most interesting and also demanding phase, which tends to be forgotten when a tree is visited repeatedly. The duration of the actual still-act with the tree is often a very small part of the whole performance, which includes the act of finding and choosing the tree. Two fairly typical

[www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550280](https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550280)

259 See *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay) 1 and 2* (2016) 14 min. 30 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/trees-in-victoria-apollo-bay/> performed in July 2016 with old fir trees in Apollo Bay in Victoria, Southern Australia. And *Trees in Victoria (Lorne) 3 and 4* (2016) 13 min. 40 sec., <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/trees-in-victoria-lorne/> performed in July 2016 with old firs in Lorne in Victoria, Southern Australia. In the split-screen videos, the close-ups to the left are of the same trees I stand next to on the right. See also <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=384988>



sessions during a Christmas holiday in Khao Lak in Thailand, made before the actual project began, can serve as examples. The huge cadaver of a tree lying on the shore next to the beach inspired me to try to perform with it, to sit with it, despite all the tourists passing by. The stillness of the human body and the stillness of the cadaver support each other.<sup>260</sup> During the same trip, I also tried sitting in a large tree with a suitably divided trunk but did not find the result interesting enough to call it a work, although it is documented in the project archive.<sup>261</sup> The fascinating climbing tree lying on the beach was too near a popular beach bar to perform with, but as the first tree I met in the year 2017, it provided the emblem of *Performing with Plants*.<sup>262</sup>

Throughout *Performing with Plants*, I made it my habit to perform with a tree in every city I visited due to a conference or a seminar, and I also chose some trees or shrubs to perform with during my holiday travels. Thus, the once-only meetings with trees and shrubs are quite many and varied; and though not all of them are really works to be proud of or worth showing in contexts other than the online archive, some could be worth a second look. The one-off sessions with trees are mostly that, one off, or consist of one or two versions with the same tree on the same occasion, as was the case

260 I edited the attempts into two versions called *Body with Corpse* (11 min.) and *Sitting with the Corpse* (5 min. 40 sec.) performed 31.12.2016. on a beach in Khao Lak <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=328160> They were shown as part of the exhibition *Body on the Rocks in the Telegraph* on Harakka Island in 2019.

261 See “Other Experiments” (2016) <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/323054>

262 See, for example, the page *Performing with Plants* on my website <https://annetearlander.com/current-projects/performing-with-plants/> or the emblem of the project archive on the Research Catalogue <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>

with one of the first “other” trees in the project, a tamarisk I performed with on the dunes of Maspalomas on Gran Canaria<sup>263</sup> and the two five-minute videos comprised of the edited material. Other such holiday trees were a palm tree in Maspalomas<sup>264</sup> and a ficus in Puerto Calero.<sup>265</sup> Most of the once-only meetings were not that deliberate; often my plan was to find a suitable tree to pose with between other activities, such as the ficus tree in a round-about on Lido di Venezia,<sup>266</sup> which I recorded from four different directions, or the unknown tree growing on the shore of Lake Ibirapuera<sup>267</sup> in Sao Paulo. There I asked my colleagues to join me in the park for a while after the IFTR conference to keep an eye on the camera while I sat in the tree. Similar brief moments after conferences with the elder tree in Krakow,<sup>268</sup> the lantern tree in Belgrade,<sup>269</sup> the linden tree in Karlsruhe<sup>270</sup> and a plane tree in Shanghai<sup>271</sup> are documenting my dutiful approach rather than the trees in question, even though some moments with trees, such as the unknown tree in Dalseong

263 *With a Tamarisk in the Wind 1* (2017) 5 min. 27 sec., *With a Tamarisk in the Wind 2* (2017) 5 min. 47 sec., performed 15.4.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=354392>

264 *With a Palm Tree* (2017) 6 min. 38 sec., performed 18.4.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=355285>

265 *With a Ficus Tree in Puerto Calero* (2018) 6 min. 9 sec., performed 31.12.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=551016>

266 *In a Roundabout 1-4* (2017) 4 min. 59 sec., performed 19.5.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=368431>

267 *By lake Ibirapuera* (2017) 6 min. 11 sec., performed 5.7.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=379236>

268 *With an Elder in Krakow* (2018) 2 min. 6 sec., performed 31.5.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=477340>

269 *In the Lantern Tree* (2018) 14 min. 26 sec., performed 14.7.2018. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=490560>

270 *With a Linden Tree in Karlsruhe* (2018) 4 min. 15 sec., performed 7.10.2018. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=515384>

271 *With a Plane Tree in Fuxing Park* (2019) 7 min. 27 sec., performed 14.7.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=658766>

Park in Daegu,<sup>272</sup> were also memorable. Some quick sketches could be edited into reasonable videos, such as the one with an alder tree on Seili island,<sup>273</sup> made during a break in the tour program of a one-day visit to the island.

Most of the trees were chosen on the basis of their form – for instance, the possibility to climb up and sit in them – or on the basis of their location, and they were not in other ways special in and of themselves; sometimes I could not even determine their species. The idea with all of them is nevertheless one session, one still-act of sitting in or standing with the tree. My approach has varied from trying to find a tree to sit in – more or less any tree that would allow me to perform in it, on it or with it for a moment – to a situation where I have encountered an impressive tree and tried to find a way to somehow perform with it or to document the tree itself. Some trees were celebrities, because they were very old and big, but they were therefore also difficult to perform with, like the ancient yew tree at Dartington Hall, although it was easily accessible once one was on the premises. Although protected by a fence, it was possible to spend time with it; the images, however, show the awkwardness in trying to pose with such a giant.<sup>274</sup> Some trees I travelled to deliberately, like Old Tjikko, which I spent a day with, as described earlier, and the ancient olive trees in Ulledecona, Catalonia, which I went to visit at the end of the project. On these occasions, I deliberately set out to work with the trees and to explore the possibilities of per-

272 *In Dalseong Park* (2018) 11 min., performed 7.7.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=488612>

273 *With an Alder on Seili – Soul Island* (2019) 5 min. 55 sec. and *With an Alder on Seili – Soul Island (mix)* (2019) 7 min. 10 sec., performed 14.6.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=646299>

274 *With a Yew in Dartington* (2019) 5 min. 10 sec., and *With a Yew in Dartington 1& 2* (2019) 9 min. 10 sec., performed 22.6.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=649501>

forming with them. In Ulledecona, my aim was to perform with local celebrity Farga de L'Arion, the oldest olive tree in the region,<sup>275</sup> but it was fenced in and protected and could be visited only on guided tours, so there was no way to perform with it, and instead I made a short video of me simply circling around it, more of a fieldnote than a work.

Some other old olive trees in the area were more easily accessible, and these olive trees in Ulledecona<sup>276</sup> provide an example of a situation where encounters with individual trees of the same species produce a series of repetition with variation. Other examples of such series were my performances with the shrubs in Jandia on Fuerteventura<sup>277</sup> and with the tabaiba,<sup>278</sup> balo<sup>279</sup> and cardon<sup>280</sup>

275 *La Farga de L'Arion* (2019) 5 min. 20 sec., performed 21.12.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760758>

276 *Dear Olive Tree* (2019) 19 min., *Examining an Olive Tree* (2019) 19 min., and *With an Olive Tree* (2019) 19 min., performed 19.12.2019 and *La Farga de L'Arion* (2019) 5 min. 20 sec., performed 21.12.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760758> as well as *With Olive Tree 765* (2019) 4 min. 50 sec., *With Olive Tree 767* (2019) 4 min. 29 sec., *With Olive Tree 770* (2019) 4 min. 3 sec., *With Olive Tree 1432 a* (2019) 4 min. 23 sec., *With Olive Tree 1432 b* (2019) 4 min. 17 sec., *With Olive Tree 2137* (2019) 4 min. 27 sec., and *With Olive Tree 4403* (2019) 5 min. 9 sec., performed 20.12.2019. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=760775>

277 *Sitting with Shrubs 1* (2017) 7 min. 57 sec., *Sitting with Shrubs 2* (2017) 7 min. 34 sec., and *Sitting with Shrubs 3* (2017) 7 min. 26 sec., performed 22.12.2017. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=417923>

278 *With the Tabaiba 1* (2018) 10 min. 15 sec., *With the Tabaiba 2* (2018) 10 min. 52 sec., *With the Tabaiba 3* (2018) 10 min. 53 sec., and *With the Tabaiba 4* (2018) 9 min. 37 sec., performed 31.3. and 1.4.2018. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=453793>

279 *With the Balo 1* (2018) 9 min. 38 sec., performed 1.4.2018, and *With the Balo 2* (2018) 11 min. 2 sec., performed 2.4.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=454015>

280 *With the Cardón 1* (2018) 7 min. 20 sec., performed 31.3.2018, *With the Cardón 2* (2018) 8 min. 24 sec., *With the Cardón 3* (2018) 9 min. 16 sec., and *With the Cardón 4* (2018) 8 min. 5 sec., performed 2.4.2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/>

on Gran Canaria in Puerto Rico. The numerous attempts at performing with pine trees in Nida,<sup>281</sup> which I have discussed at length elsewhere,<sup>282</sup> are other examples of such variations. Even the two Australian banyan trees in Alicante<sup>283</sup> form a series of sorts. These spectacular trees I tried to perform with, even though they were growing in crowded city parks, simply because I found them so impressive. With them I also made a small experiment with moving my camera along the contours of their trunk to somehow capture their fascinating forms.<sup>284</sup> (The emblem of the project Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees is a detail of the trunk of the

profile/show-work?work=454012

- 281 *Resting with a Pine 1* (2017) 12 min. 58 sec. and *Resting with a Pine 2* (2017) 12 min. 2 sec., performed 9.9.2017, *Resting with a Pine 3* (2017) 6 min., performed 12.9.2017, *Resting with a Pine 4* (2017) 9 min. 16 sec., *Resting with a Pine 5* (2017) 8 min. 10 sec. and *Resting with a Pine 6* (2017) 6 min. 58 sec., performed 13.9.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=387855> See also *Resting with a Pine 7* (2017) 8 min. 12 sec. and *Resting with a Pine 8* (2017) 8 min. 12 sec., performed 23.9.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=392545> *Resting with a Pine 9* (2017) 5 min. 26 sec., *Resting with a Pine 10* (2017) 7 min. 10 sec., *Resting with a Pine 11* (2017) 7 min. 10 sec., and *Resting with a Pine 12* (2017) 6 min. 15 sec., performed on 26.9.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=393160> as well as *Sunday with a Pine* (2017) 8 min. 12 sec., performed 24.9.2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=410375>
- 282 Arlander 2019a.
- 283 *Dear Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 19 min. 30 sec., performed 25.12.2019 in Parque de Canalejas in Alicante, *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II* (2020) 14 min. 13 sec. and *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II (mix)* (2020) 14 min. 35 sec., performed 27.12.2019 in Parque Gabriel Miró in Alicante <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>
- 284 *Around Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 2 min. 25 sec. and the split-screen video *Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 2 min. 11 sec., recorded 25.12.2019 in Parque de Canalejas in Alicante as well as *Around Ficus Macrophylla II* (2019) 3 min. 55 sec., recorded 27.12.2019 in Parque Gabriel Miró in Alicante <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>

first one I met.)<sup>285</sup> Such intensive periods of working with many trees for one day or a few days form, in some sense, the opposite approach to visiting one tree repeatedly for a year. Both approaches generate repetition with variation, either through changes occurring over time or through changes between members of the same species that have sufficiently similar characteristics to form the basis for a recognizable pattern.

On some occasions, I have made videos of trees without performing with them, like the magnificent *Ficus macrophylla* trees in Alicante,<sup>286</sup> which I made some experiments with, trying to record their stunning forms with a moving camera. Later I used the same technique with some other huge trees, like the Wits blue gum tree<sup>287</sup> in Johannesburg, an old oak<sup>288</sup> in Nirox sculpture park and a “tarri” pine on Hailuoto,<sup>289</sup> adding several vertical video clips to one horizontal clip. Combining several images within one frame is another

285 See, for example, the project blog “Meetings with remarkable and Unremarkable Trees” <https://meetingswithtrees.com/> and the “logo” for the project archive on the Research Catalogue <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=761326>

286 See *Dear Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 19 min. 30 sec., *Around Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 2 min. 25 sec., and *Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 2 min. 11 sec., performed 25.12.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495> as well as *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II* (2019) 14 min. 13 sec., *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II (mix)* (2019) 14 min. 35 sec., and *Around Ficus Macrophylla II* (2019) 3 min. 55 sec., performed 27.12.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>

287 See *Wits Bluegum Tree* (2020) 2 min., a compilation of small videos recorded while circling the trunk of Wits Bluegum Tree, on the campus of University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, on 12.3.2020 and inserted into a previous attempt on 4.3.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=820403>

288 See *The Dutch Oak in Nirox* (2020) 4 min. 31 sec., made circling the Dutch Oak in Nirox Sculpture Park, 18.3.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823673>

289 See *The Tarri Pine* (2021) 2 min. 46 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1225961>

mode of repetition with variation, which can be used for layering time as well, as when inserting images of the same place, recorded earlier, into a recent image of the same place, as discussed in the context of time-lapse videos.

What to do with all these brief videos is another question. One of the reasons I prefer creating series of works is that such groups of videos are easier to show as a small exhibition, where the variations seen next to each other help the viewer focus on small shifts and changes. Individual sessions with trees, which could have a suitable length for screening, often resemble still photographs and are not necessarily meaningful to watch from beginning to end.

### Calendars



*Helsinki Tree Calendar: Birch in January (2017) video still*

One way to combine one-off sessions is by creating a calendar. This strategy, which emphasizes temporality in another manner, I experimented with in *Performing with Plants* by creating tree calendars based on the Celtic lunar tree calendar: *Helsinki Tree Calendar* in

2017<sup>290</sup> and *Stockholm Tree Calendar* in 2018.<sup>291</sup> A list including information about species, location and duration gives an overview of both of the calendars.<sup>292</sup> In Stockholm, I also wrote small scores or notes resembling poems in Swedish and English for each tree and month. The calendars consist of a single session with the tree of the month and thus combine the timespan of a year with one-off sessions with specific trees.

I used the idea of the calendar for the first time by visiting a pine tree near my grandmother's cottage during the year of the dog, 2006–2007,<sup>293</sup> as a sequel to my weekly visits there the year before. I returned to the idea at the end of the series *Animal Years* by returning to the first site of the year of the horse after completing the full round of twelve years, albeit only once a month this time.<sup>294</sup> I have

290 Each part of *Helsinki Tree Calendar* is listed as an individual work on the RC, but they are also combined on one page, which gives a better idea of the series <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/327809> and listed on my blog <https://annettearlander.com/2018/12/30/helsinki-tree-calendar/>

291 Each part of *Stockholm Tree Calendar* is listed as an individual work on the RC but are also combined on one page, giving a better idea of the series <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/425654>, and they are listed, in Swedish, on the Stockholm blog <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/2018/12/30/stockholms-tradkalender/>

292 “The Tree Calendar” <https://annettearlander.com/current-projects/the-tree-calendar/>

293 *Year of the Dog in Kalvola – Calendar 1–2* (2007) 4 min. 9 sec., documents a monthly visit to a pine in Koivumäki, Kalvola. In Part 1 I hang with a yellowish scarf on my shoulders from an old pine tree in Kalvola twelve times, once a month in 2006 (with the exception of April, which was made in 2007). In Part 2 I lean on the same pine tree on the same occasions. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1097773>

294 *Year of the Horse – Calendar 1–2* (2015) 2 x 11 min. 10 sec. is a documentation of a performance where I stand with a blue scarf on my shoulders close to the camera, obscuring part of the view from the cliff, on Harakka Island, 12 times, once a month from January 2014 to January 2015, on the same site, which I visited once a week during the year of the horse, 2002, wearing the same dark-blue scarf. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=307822>

returned to the idea of monthly visits recently as well.<sup>295</sup> I had worked with the Celtic tree calendar before, in the context of a series of small site-specific sound works in the series *Trees Talk*.<sup>296</sup> Using the Celtic tree calendar as a starting point for a video calendar occurred to me only when I set out to choose my first trees to visit in Helsinki at the beginning of the project. I created a calendar first in Helsinki and then another in Stockholm. Besides finding trees of the right specimen, according to the calendar, and recording a session with each of them, I also tried to locate them in various parks of each city.

Like the Chinese calendar I used in *Animal Years*, the Celtic tree calendar is based on lunar cycles, including thirteen months, and does not coincide with the Western solar calendar. There are various versions of the calendar: I used a fairly common version beginning with the birch moon (24 December to 20 January) and ending with the elder moon (24 November to 23 December).<sup>297</sup> Those thirteen months were divided slightly differently in both versions, with the Helsinki version including *Hawthorn in June* and *Oak in June*, while the Stockholm version includes *Rowan in February* and *Ash in February*. Some of the trees – birch, rowan, ash, alder, willow, hawthorn, oak, holly, hazel, vine, ivy, reed and elder – are not commonly considered trees. The vine, ivy and reed are not even shrubs, and not all of them are easily found in the north. The holly I could find only in botanical gardens, and in Helsinki I had difficulty finding the vine (replaced by a creeper) and the ivy (replaced by a houseplant).

295 *Year of the Ox – On the Lowest Branch* (12 min. 10 sec.) a video recording monthly visits (15.2.2021– 7.1.2022) to a birch on Harakka Island. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1159196>

296 The works included in the ongoing or incomplete series are compiled on a page on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/62946/159786>

297 I followed the tree species and dates in the reference that I added to my blog posts, the page “Celtic Tree Months” <https://www.learnreligions.com/celtic-tree-months-2562403>

Besides the time of year, the tree calendars emphasize the diversity of the trees and shrubs, as well as the variety of locations in the city. The duration of each session was rather similar: in Helsinki between 4 and 14 minutes and in Stockholm between 9 and 18 minutes. The videos have been edited into various formats: thirteen-channel installations,<sup>298</sup> compilations for screening with the beginning of each session<sup>299</sup> and into a literal calendar, that is, with each video shown as an independent work during the month in question.<sup>300</sup> The editing in all of them emphasizes continuity, an ongoing duration without specific beginning or end, a form of uninterrupted real time.

298 *Helsinki Tree Calendar* (2018) 4 min. 40 sec., the installation version consists of thirteen videos of equal duration to be shown simultaneously, synchronized, nonstop on thirteen screens in a row from left to right, with the tenth screen placed vertically <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/the-helsinki-tree-calendar-2/>

299 *Helsinki Tree Calendar* (2018) 17 min. 42 sec., the screening version, which consists of the beginning of all 13 images or scenes in the calendar, with the initial title, in English, included. The ninth image is recorded vertical and here tilted horizontally <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/the-helsinki-tree-calendar/>

300 *Stockholm Tree Calendar* was shown one work at a time on a screen at the entrance to SKH on Linnégatan in 2018. There is also a screening version (17 min. 42 sec.) and an installation for thirteen monitors (9 min. 26 sec.).

## Duration



*Stockholm Tree Calendar: Birch in January – Humlegården (2018) video still*

When thinking of schedule, not only the frequency of the repetition but also the actual time of day and duration of a session are relevant. Usually, I have not used strict limitations for the exact moment or time of day or duration of each session for the time-lapse works. When working with a day or a day and night, sunrise and sunset are relevant, and if repeating a session every hour, keeping the exact time is important. Mostly, the exact time has not been important, however, although the daily repetitions sometimes take place at approximately the same time of day, like a morning routine, but without any real precision. The same “looseness” goes for the duration of each session, which I often mark by counting my breaths. A certain flexibility makes commitment to the practice easier and the experience more rewarding.

Technology provides some limitations as well. Earlier, when working with DV cassettes, their duration (60 min.) marked the limit of a session. The camera I currently use has a time limitation of 21 minutes for individual video clips, which could be doubled by using a remote control, but usually 20 minutes is more than enough.

When performing for camera and recording the material, the exact duration is not so important, as long as there is enough material, because the duration of the clips can be adjusted by editing.

The material generated using a specific schedule can be edited into videos by using very different temporal principles for the composition, although the initial choices provide some limitations, of course. A one-off session cannot be made into a time-lapse work, and time-lapse material is hard to make into a durational still-act. The chosen clip’s duration is relevant to the rhythm of the video, and usually only a small part of each time-lapse session is used in the edited version; there is much more material than what is actually needed. Often, I edit so-called full-length versions of the year-long time-lapse works, sometimes divided into several parts, using the full duration of the recorded performances, excluding only my entrance and exit. These versions are rarely shown anywhere; they remain in my archive. For exhibition purposes, I have edited videos of the year-long works made during the project, both in Helsinki and in Stockholm, by using one-minute clips of each session, as well as versions with ten-second clips for screening purposes. Although the duration of the individual performances varies, depending on mood, weather and chance occurrences, the final videos often use durations that are exactly the same, up to a single frame. This makes the synchronization of the videos in a multi-channel installation easier and also accentuates the rhythmic repetition in a screening work.

The one-off sessions are often deliberately longer than the sessions of repeated visits in order to generate a sufficient amount of material to create an impression of a still-act or an effect resembling still photography. In some cases, the duration of the performance or pose is defined by the action, as is customary in performance art – how long I am able to hang from the tree or how long I am able to balance on my toes while reaching up with my arms in “becoming a tree”.

## Writing



*With the Pine on Hundudden* (2020) video still

Within *Performing with Plants*, and especially *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, writing has been a key tool. Earlier, I used text added to the videos in only a few instances, although I have written extensively about my performances for camera in weekly blog posts and also “around” them in terms of academic papers and presentations. Adding text to the videos themselves, either as spoken narration, as subtitles or both, has been an important new strategy. In the latter project, I have also experimented with the act of writing as an action performed for the camera. The main types of writing or forms of text I have used are diary entries and letters, in addition to some experiments with a semi-academic essay form.

## *Writing diary entries*



*Sunday with a Pine* (2017) video still

One of the various ways to use text as part of a video work that I have tried is recording diary entries written during the process and adding them as a voiceover to the video. Notes made during the process, either in Finnish, Swedish or English, can be added as a spoken and recorded voiceover track on the video, possibly with English subtitles. The first experiments with adding text as a sound to a video I did in works that record a day with a tree, in which I used the notes written every hour between my performances and added them as a soundtrack, such as in *Grey Day in Rekdal*,<sup>301</sup> *Sunday with a Pine*<sup>302</sup> and *Day with a Juniper*.<sup>303</sup> The first experiment using the diary form was when performing with a downy birch

301 *Grey Day in Rekdal* (2017) 15 min. 20 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=381354>

302 *Sunday with a Pine* (2017) 8 min. 12 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=410375>

303 *Day with a Juniper* (2019) 21 min. 56 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>

in Rekdal on Lofoten, partly because the tree was near the house where I was staying and it was easy to return to my computer to write between sessions. This experience I later compared with another video work recording a day with a tree, albeit without notes.<sup>304</sup> When performing with a juniper on Utö two years later, I chose to make the notes by hand, outdoors – except for the very last ones, when it was too cold for that – and then transcribe them before recording. The video *Day with Old Tjikko*<sup>305</sup> was supposed to have a voiceover with the notes made throughout the day, but I have not completed the work, partly because the rather brief notes written on 13 May 2019 – while spending a day with the ancient spruce tree growing on Fulufjället in Sweden and with Camilla Johansson Bäcklund, who suggested the visit – were written in Swedish. I published them on my blog<sup>306</sup> but did not add them to the video, partly because they seem somehow trivial in the context. One problem is the language. I would not like to add subtitles to the images; now, when time has passed, I could perhaps translate the notes into English and rewrite them in some manner. In *Day with a Firethorne Rhus*,<sup>307</sup> a video created in Nirox Sculpture Park in 2020, I again recorded the notes as a voiceover. The same technique I used later in *Day with a Bog*

304 *The Tide in Kan Tiang* (2016), see Arlander 2019b.

305 *Day with Old Tjikko* (2019) several durations <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=635417>

306 Blog post about the visit in English <https://annetearlander.com/2019/05/16/meetings-with-remarkable-trees-old-tjikko/> and the notes in Swedish <https://annetearlander.com/2019/05/16/en-dag-med-ett-av-varldens-aldsta-trad/>

307 *Day with a Firethorne Rhus* (2020) 24 min. 10 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433>

*Birch*,<sup>308</sup> made in Mustarinda, and *Day with a Pine*,<sup>309</sup> as well as *Another Day with Pine*,<sup>310</sup> performed on Örö and in some works made in Kilpisjärvi<sup>311</sup> and Eckerö.<sup>312</sup>

The following transcript of the voiceover added to the video *Sunday with a Pine* (2017), based on a blog post with notes written after each session on the day of the performance, 24.9.2017,<sup>313</sup> can serve as an example of the strategy of using diary notes. After the brief introduction, each part of the text is related to the respective images and begins by indicating the time at hand.

Sunday with a Pine. I finally decided to visit one of the pine trees up on the dunes every two-hours for a day, creating a time-lapse video in the manner I have done in other places. I decided to start at eight in the morning, after sunrise, and finish at eight at night, after sunset. And to write some notes of each session. So...

308 *Day with a Bog Birch (with text)* (2020) 20 min. and *Day with a Bog Birch* (2020) 52 min. 17 sec., recorded 23.9.2020 with a birch near Mustarinda house every hour from sunrise to sunset (7 am to 7 pm). <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=999356>

309 *Day with a Pine* (2020) 3 min. 20 sec., *Day with a Pine (brief)* (2020) 54 sec., and *Day with a Pine (long)* (2020) 11 min. 20 sec., performed 13.11. 2020 every hour between 8 am and 7 pm with a pine on Örö. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1045048>

310 *Another Day with a Pine* (2020) 50 min., *Another Day with a Pine – brief* (2020) 5 min. 43 sec., and *Kära Tall (Another Day with a Pine – with text)* (2020) 14 min., performed 28.11.2020 every hour between 9 am and 4 pm with a pine tree on Örö <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1066610>

311 *Day and Night with a Mountain Birch (brief)* (2021) 13 min. 15 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1292734>

312 *Dagen med Asken – Day with an Ash* (2021) 26 min. 12 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1307712/484/2838>

313 “Sunday with a Pine” blog post <https://annetearlander.com/2017/09/24/sunday-with-a-pine/>



Fresh morning, quiet, empty parking lot on the hill (one car that has stayed there from yesterday), the parasols of the souvenir stands are all tight and shut. I am early; finding the spot for the camera tripod is easy, framing the image is relatively easy, too. The sun is only a yellow colouring in the east, showing only as a vague glow on the tree trunk. It is quarter to eight, I climb up in the tree and sit there for approximately five minutes, enjoying the silence and the wind. Then climbing down, packing my things and returning downhill to the colony. The rays of the sun are turning brighter behind the trees.

Quarter to ten, the first bus stands on the parking lot, with a few cars around; all the souvenir stalls are up. A couple with bicycles rests on the bench by the road on the way up. The sun is high, brightening the surroundings. Suddenly the yellow leaves in the small birches stand out. I repeat my routine – second time and it is already a routine – sit in the tree and enjoy the view. I am aware of cramping my thighs around the branch unnecessarily, but if I try to relax, I immediately feel unstable. The sun is not really warm and there is a chilly wind from the east; the morning is still, fresh and new.

Quarter to twelve, noon, and sunshine. It is warm, now. The bus is gone, replaced by lots of private cars; I can hear the car doors banging while sitting in the pine. An ant is moving towards me on the branch, I hope it finds a way around me, and choose not to wipe it away. I have learned how to get up on the branch and how to get down with relative ease, but I still have not found a way to sit comfortably. What feels OK to begin with soon becomes uncomfortable, and I do not want to move in the image. After all, I am sitting there only five minutes at a time.

Quarter to two, midday to afternoon, warm like summer. A woman is walking in bare feet past the tree when I arrive with my camera bag. While sitting in the tree, in its shade, I hear voices of children behind me, adults laughing, speaking Russian or Lithuanian or both. Later, when I return to the camera it has turned black, the battery? No, when I turn the camera on, it has recorded 7 seconds, and then stopped, why? Well, there is nothing else to be done but to climb up in the tree again. This time I wait to see that the camera continues working at least 30 seconds. I have no idea what happened, but this was a good reminder not to take any of my collaborators for granted. At least there were less noisy humans around the second time...

Quarter to four, almost hot, lots of traffic. The guy selling souvenirs closest to the slope looks at me with suspicion; why is she here again? Or then I am the suspicious one. The sun is no longer above me, but luckily not straight in my face either, or in the face of the camera, that is. Only two more sessions after this one; time passes so quickly it is almost scary. The walk up and down the slope feels like nothing, especially the walk down the slope, except for the constant stream of cars and huge coaches. I uploaded the clips on my computer and tried to combine the ones recorded so far. The image jumps quite a lot between each session, probably because the tripod sinks into the sand a little different each time.

Quarter to six, evening is approaching. In the forest below the hill it is already chilly, although the sun is still high in the sky when viewed from the dunes. It is hard to believe that it will set in less than two hours. There are no more coaches in the parking lot, one came down while I was on my way up the hill. Most of the souvenir stalls have closed, but there are plenty of private cars still. The pine looks really beautiful in the evening sun. This was the next to

last session; the last one will be right after sun set and I am already worried that it will be too dark, for the camera to record anything and for me to find my way back. But for now, everything is glowing bright and beautiful with warm evening colours.

Quarter to eight, after sunset, or actually a few minutes before, I guess, because I hurried up the hill, scared of the approaching darkness. But no problem, the light lingers on and up among the dunes the sand reflects the light, too. There were two cars left on the hill, and while returning down I still had no need for a torch. The view from the pine, with a pale violet sky and a thin crescent moon was so beautiful; what a pity that the camera sees it so very differently. I had to make all possible adjustments to let it record something, and it did. So now my Sunday with the pine is over, and it passed so very, very quickly.

Written immediately after each video recording session, such texts are “improvised” and performed in the moment, and I rarely change the text before speaking and recording it, except for obvious spelling mistakes. Therefore, there is an element of risk: what if I have nothing to say? And sometimes my notes are really trivial, of course. When I showed the video with this text for the first time, some of the viewers noted with interest the contrast between the romantic and almost sublime imagery and the mundane, everyday character of the text, while others emphasized the importance of the silent moments in some of the sessions, when the duration of the image is longer than the spoken text. While describing and discussing my work in Nida, I later made extensive use of my blog notes and included the video with the text in spoken form as an appendix to the article.<sup>314</sup>

314 See “Resting with Pines in Nida,” (Arlander 2019a) and *Sunday with a Pine – with*

### *Writing letters to trees*



*Dear Ficus Macrophylla 1* (2019) video still

An important strategy for performing with trees not really employed within the project *Performing with Plants*, only developed at the very end of it, has been writing letters to trees while next to the trees. The strategy could in some sense be considered an outcome of the project further developed in *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*. The act of writing a letter to a tree while sitting next to the tree was something that occurred to me only after using the epistolary form in a voiceover text written for a video work afterwards. Subsequent explorations were based on this experiment with addressing the tree rather than speaking as the tree or on behalf of the tree, as I had done, for example, in the series of small audio works *Trees Talk*.<sup>315</sup> When experimenting with ways to employ text in the artwork itself, I wrote a voiceover script

*text* (2017) 8 min. 12 sec. <https://vimeo.com/287796798>

315 See summary of *Talking Trees* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/62946/159786>

in the form of a letter to the pine tree I had performed with for a year in *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)*<sup>316</sup>. The letter was my first attempt at addressing the tree and including it as an agent and co-performer, not by speaking on behalf of it but “to” it, in a semi-fictional manner. The full text has also been published separately in a slightly revised form.<sup>317</sup> Here I include only the beginning of the letter as an example:

Dearest Pine,

I know I should have written to you before, but something else always seemed more urgent or important. Now, when almost a year has passed since our time together, I just want to tell you how much I appreciated the opportunity to spend time with you, and your patience with my irregular comings and goings, my clumsiness and insensitivity at times, and my general human brutality.

We met for the first time on 15 February 2018, when I finally decided to simply begin my repeated visits to Lill-Jansskog by creating a round, a walk with a few stops or stations, to pose for a camera on tripod. And you were my last stop, the moment to rest and feel nurtured by your hospitality, after sitting on two spruce stumps and swinging as well as hanging in a tall pine, not far from the place you live in. My plan was to find a pine tree to hang and swing from, the spruce stumps were something extra, a reaction in the moment, a response to circumstances. I found a pine further away on a hill towards Brunnsviken, and even made a try-out image (on 4 February) together with it, but never felt comfortable with

316 *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine) with text* (2019) 16 min. 50 sec. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=652999>

317 In *Eco Noir*, edited by Jack Faber and Anna Shraer (Arlander 2020c).

that contact, so I looked for something else. And now, in retrospect, I realize how important it was that I met you.

The first letter to a tree written next to the tree – or performing writing for the camera, as it were – was made at the very end of the project on a short visit to Catalonia. I had the impulse to sit and write alongside the first old olive tree I met in Ulldecona<sup>318</sup> on my trip to visit some ancient olive trees there during Christmas-time 2019. To this first olive tree I addressed several letters; soon I realized, however, that the act of writing letters to the tree was not meaningful from a distance. It was the act of sitting next to the tree that mattered, focusing on the tree and entering into a kind of dialogue with it there and then, albeit via writing.

This action of writing produces a monologue rather than a true dialogue, but in the best of cases it can serve as an exercise in focus and observation. In the worst case, however, the act of writing further accentuates the gap between the human and the vegetal mode of existence by bringing in language and writing, which are decidedly human activities, rather than breathing and perceiving, which are much more closely related processes for both humans and plants. The action of writing in front of the camera, of “performing writing”, brings in an added dimension, although the presence of the camera is not very dominating. My first experiments in Ulldecona consisted only of this action; the video depicted the act of writing like any other action. In later experiments I realized I could record the text and add it as a voiceover to the video. Before discussing this letter writing further, I will share the beginning of the first letter to this olive tree as an example:

318 See documentation of the first writing experiments in Ulldecona and Alicante in December 2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/820905>

Dearest Olive Tree, [19.12.2019]

I apologise for disturbing you this afternoon, but I have walked two hours to find you and am really grateful to be able to sit down at your roots for a while. Of the olive trees marked with signs indicating their age and size I chose you, because of these old roots that provide an almost comfortable bench to sit on. On the way here, I passed numerous olive trees, this area is full of “olivieros” or olive orchards, or perhaps we could call them by their brutal name, plantations. Most of the trees were much, much younger than you, but some of them looked really old as well. Funny, that I needed an official sign to feel entitled to sit down, as if you were on duty, serving the tourist industry now, in your old age. The officially oldest olive tree in (Catalonia,) Spain, Europe, and perhaps the world, grows only a few kilometres away from here, on a private estate called L'Arion, that has made a business of allowing only guided tours to visit the tree. I am really happy and proud to have found you, with a little help from a city clerk serving as a make-do tourist officer, since the tourist office in Ulldecona is closed. He made me a map how to get here, based on a note on the website. This little grove is called La Foia d'Ulldecona and is clearly marked with bright green signboards. Right now, there is no one else here but me – and you, of course, all of you. Some of the trees around you look much younger, and only three are marked with information boards. They are all more than 900 years old.<sup>319</sup> They say that many of you, old olive trees, have been cut down and replaced by other types of olive trees that yield larger harvests of olives. But some clever managers have realized that they can make a profit by selling olive oil made from these old, old ones, like you. I am rather old myself, although

319 This was a misunderstanding; the numbers on the trees do not indicate their age but the order they have been identified.

never near your venerable age, even transposed to human terms, but, in any case, I can identify with the feeling of getting older and not being as productive and quick to learn new things as younger people. So, I sympathize with the idea of finding value in the products of elders, more slowly made, but perhaps special in their flavour, in their own way...

Unlike later experiments with letter writing, I did not record this text and add it as a voiceover to the video. The act of writing was more of an exercise in attention, an experiment in considering ways to address or make acquaintance with a tree. I wrote three letters to the same olive tree, only the first one next to the tree. All three letters are published in full as part of a video essay in JER.<sup>320</sup> Besides these first experiments in Ulldecona, I continued my experiments during the following days and wrote letters to two Australian banyan trees in Alicante,<sup>321</sup> again sitting next to them, this time in the middle of the city.

The video of me writing a letter to the banyan tree in Alicante 25.12. formed the basis for my presentation at CARPA 7 – Elastic Writing in Artistic Research (2021) and is published in the proceedings.<sup>322</sup> I include here only the beginning of the first letter as an example:

320 Arlander, Annette. 2021c. “Dear Olive Tree.” *Journal of Embodied Research*, 4(2): 5 (19:40). 2021. DOI <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer:70>

321 See *Dear Ficus Macrophylla I* (2019) 19 min. 30 sec., performed 25.12.2019 in Parque de Canalejas in Alicante as well as *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II* (2020) 14 min. 13 sec. and *Dear Ficus Macrophylla II (mix)* (2020) 14 min. 35 sec., performed 27.12.2019 in Parque Gabriel Miró in Alicante <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=761495>

322 Arlander, Annette. 2022. “Writing with Trees”. *Proceedings of CARPA 7 – Elastic Writing in Artistic Research* <https://nivel.teak.fi/carpa7/writing-with-trees/>

Dear *Ficus Macrophylla*, or Australian Banyan Tree. I came back to visit you with a notebook and my camera, because the idea occurred to me this morning, before I was even properly awake. I came here yesterday, as it felt like a duty of sorts. If I am to use your trunk, or the image of your trunk as a logo for my blog,<sup>323</sup> I should at least thank you for that. And after visiting you here in the park by the harbour, I looked up some facts about you on the internet and I got to know your name, and that you are from Australia originally. And also that you are sometimes called the strangler tree, because if your seed germinates on the branch of another tree you will grow roots down to the earth from there and then slowly strangle your host. Why that should be necessary I did not really understand, but perhaps it is a question of space. Here in the park, you have plenty of space, each of you, with a ceramic fence surrounding every one of you.

The second letter, a shorter one, written to another banyan tree in a nearby park, has not been published anywhere, nor added to the video, and is therefore included here in full:

27.12.2019

Dear *Ficus Macrophylla*, excuse me for disturbing you, but I suppose I am not the first one to sit on your root here in the Gabriel Miró park. There is an empty water bottle and some other signs of human visitors right at my feet. And the strange graffiti writing MDC on your trunk. After circling you a few times I decided this was the best place or camera angle for a video, as probably quite a few people have decided before me. What I wonder, though, is how

you would like to present yourself if you could choose? Well, I mean present yourself for my camera, that is, because of course you are presenting yourself all the time, for the sun, the wind, the insects, the fountain nearby, which I can clearly hear all the time, the passing cars and humans and anything else around you. Probably you present yourself in very special ways to the fungi and microbes in the soil, or the insects on your leaves, and so on. As Michael Marder has pointed out plants are the true artists of life, because they create themselves all the time. And you have created this magnificent system of roots and trunks and branches. I wonder what they were supposed to be good for originally. Now you are clearly growing them for respect of tradition or out of habit, but the tradition was probably developed for a reason. Did you grow on unstable ground and needed all these roots to keep you in balance? Or was it to get the upper hand in a competition with your neighbours? Or was it simply a mutation that included some other benefits and these sculptural forms were sort of a side-effect? I should try to read a little, because clearly you will not answer me directly, however long I would sit here. (And now I feel worried about the camera behind me, although there are lots of people in the park so it would be difficult for somebody to just take it and walk away. Perhaps I am simply paranoid again.) The sun is bathing your leaves, but here, down at your roots, it does not reach, not at the moment, at least. And it does not need to, I suppose, because it is in your leaves that you go on with the photosynthesis, and the roots are simply transport channels, at least the parts above ground. Below ground, in the soil, they are working hard, I guess, but these intermediate forms, something between a root and a trunk or a branch are the ones that fascinate us humans. Do the hanging ones pick up some moist from the air? The bended root-trunks are the “perfect garden furniture” for us, to put it bluntly. So, I will not know how you would like to present

<sup>323</sup> See blog for Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees <https://meetingswithtrees.com>

yourself or how you would like me to represent you even less, at least not today. This was my humble attempt at addressing you, in vain. Thank you for allowing me to do that, and all the best for the coming year – thank you!

These letters written to trees on my Christmas trip were one-time encounters. Only after the project was over, while planning the follow-up project with trees, did I begin to deliberately develop some kind of extended pen pal relationship with a pine in Stockholm. I chose a small pine tree on Hundudden as my friend to visit every now and then and to sit and write next to, imagining that I could write additional letters to the pine from my trips later that spring. These visits I documented online,<sup>324</sup> and I planned to write letters to the pine from Johannesburg, where I was going to stay for two months. I soon realized, however, that writing was only meaningful next to the tree. I therefore planned to return to the tree regularly, though that proved impossible due to the pandemic.

324 See documentation of the four first visits and the first letters, in Swedish, to a pine on Hundudden in Stockholm, a project interrupted by the pandemic <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/771644>

### *Writing and reading or speaking*



*Dear Firethorne Rhus II* (2020) video still

Another way of using letter writing that I explored during my brief stay in Nirox Sculpture Park, was writing a letter to the tree while performing for the camera with the tree and then recording that text and adding it to the video's soundtrack. The first experiments with this I made with two small firethorn rhus shrubs that I performed with in Nirox, resulting in the video works *Dear Firethorn Rhus*<sup>325</sup> and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II*.<sup>326</sup> These letters are published in full in the ARA publication.<sup>327</sup>

325 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec., performed in Nirox Sculpture Park 18.3.2020. The text written during the performance was recorded and added as a voiceover to the video *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)* (2020) 6 min. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813>

326 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus II* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec., performed in the Nirox Nature Reserve 19.3.2020. The text written during the performance was recorded and added as a voiceover to the video *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)* (2020) 6 min., <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675>

327 In *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg with Environs* (Arlander 2021, pp. 86–91) <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/30395>

The reading of the text usually goes much faster than writing it by hand, and thus the spoken text is much shorter than the writing of that same text in the image, which means that there is no possibility of real synchronicity; the speech of the voiceover cannot really be properly synchronized with the writing of those same words. An impression of presence, of the here and now, is nevertheless easily created with the combination of showing the act of writing and reading the text aloud. The impression of being able to follow the writing of the person in the image, as if she were speaking to herself while writing, can be quite strong. This kind of illusion of presence actually makes the video more conventional, in terms of cinematic convention, and gives quite a lot of importance to the text spoken. The effect depends on how closely one can see the actions of the writer and how the speaker phrases her sentences. The feeling of a “natural connection” between what is being done in the image and what is said is stronger in *Dear Firethorne Rhus II*, probably because we can see the writer and her hand movements better than in *Dear Firethorne Rhus*, where the figure is seen from the back and the movement of the water dominates. The combination of writing a text and then speaking it as if occurring at the same time is something I have explored further in later experiments. I have even experimented with really speaking the text instead of writing it, using a separate microphone in my hand, in Swedish,<sup>328</sup> but that does not necessarily seem anymore “natural” than the artificial combination of writing a text and then reading and recording it afterwards.

After these first experiments, I explored writing to trees at home in Helsinki, such as with a pine in Brunnsparken<sup>329</sup> (to compensate

328 In *Tala om det för tallen (Tell it to the Pine) I and 2* on Örö 11.1.2021 and 20.2.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1107375/512/201>

329 See documentation of the performances with the Pine in Brunnsparken, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544>

for not being able to visit the pine on Hundudden in Stockholm) and a spruce on Harakka Island.<sup>330</sup> During various residencies, including ones in Mustarinda,<sup>331</sup> Öres,<sup>332</sup> Hailuoto,<sup>333</sup> Ars BioArctica in Kilpisjärvi<sup>334</sup> and Eckerö,<sup>335</sup> I further explored this strategy, writing letters to trees in Finnish, Swedish or English, reading and recording the

330 See documentation of the performances with the spruce of Harakka Island, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/844990/0/0>

331 See *Dear Spruce* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec., and *Rakas kuusi* (2020) 5 min. 47 sec., and *Rakas Kuusi - Dear Spruce* (2020) 5 min. 47. sec., written with a spruce in Mustarinda on 25.9.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1001233>, *Dear Deceased* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec. and *Dear Deceased (with text)* 6 min. 26 sec., written with a dead spruce in Mustarinda on 29.9.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1003945>, and *Dear Birch* (2020) 20 min. 15 sec. and *Kära Björk* (2020) 5 min. 50 sec., written with a birch in Mustarinda on 29.9.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1003944>

332 See *Writing with a Pine I and II* (2020) 20 min. written twice with the same pine on Örö, on 10.11.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1042213>, *Writing in a Pine* (2020) 13 min. and *Writing in a Pine (with text)* (2020) 5 min. 20 sec., written in and with a pine on Örö 16.11.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1048237>, *Dear Pine* (2020) 10 min. and *Dear Pine (with text)* (2020) 4 min. 30 sec., written with a pine tree on Örö on 18.11.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1050123>, *Pines by the Path* (2020) 16 min. 20 sec. and *Pines by the Path (Kära Tall)* (2020) 4 min. 5 sec., written with two pines on Örö 1.12.2020 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1070839>

333 See *Esteemed Tarri Pine (with text)* 8 min. 10 sec., written 14.4.2021 to a pine on Hailuoto, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1225961/0/0> in response to the invitation to create a provocation for the project Designing the Pluriversity <https://designingpluriversity.org>

334 See *Dear Mountain Birch (with text)* 7 min., written to a mountain birch in Kilpisjärvi 10.6.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1294375/861/4242> and *Dearest Mountain Birch (with text)* 7 min., written to a mountain birch in Kilpisjärvi 11.6.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1289070/574/4919>

335 See *Askträdet på Eckerö - The Ash Tree in Eckerö (med text - with text)* 6 min. 11 sec., written to an ash tree 8.7.2021 on the Post Quay on Eckerö Island. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1307712/510/510>

texts aloud and adding them as voiceovers to the videos. In some cases, I have translated the Finnish or Swedish letters to English and added the translation as subtitles, and in some cases I used the text only in the form of subtitles, as a visual scroll without sound.<sup>336</sup> And, as mentioned before, I have also experimented with addressing the tree through speech directly, rather than writing, recording my words with a handheld microphone.<sup>337</sup> The shift from writing to speaking changes the situation significantly for the speaker-writer, more than for the viewer-listener of the final video.

At some point, I felt that the texts were becoming rather dull and repetitive over time and abandoned the practice, but I used it again when encountering new trees in new circumstances. Perhaps writing is an action that works best as a tool at the first encounter, when approaching a tree for the first time. Writing letters to the same tree repeatedly requires another type of relationship, although returning to a tree one has not seen for a while can be a powerful experience as well.

The act of writing a letter to a tree while next to the tree can be understood as a performance, an action performed for the camera like any other action, comparable to listening or looking. It can be used in other ways as well. First of all, it is an exercise in writing, a practice of automatic writing, writing whatever comes to mind at that moment without censoring it, and thus a manner of producing text. Secondly, it is a therapeutic practice of sorts, expressing

336 See, for example, *Dearest Pine Tree (with text)* (2021) 15 min. 45. sec., written in and with a pine on Örö 21.2.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1165222/70/121> and *Esteemed Pine Tree (2021)* 16 min. 15. sec., written in and with a pine on Örö 23.2.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1165222/67/1121>

337 See *Tala om det för tallen (Tell it to the Pine) 1–7* (2021), spoken to a pine on Örö between 11.1. and 13.11.2021 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1107375/524/212>

one's thoughts and problems to the tree as if to a teacher or therapist, a way of articulating one's concerns that can in itself be helpful. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, addressing the tree is a practice of focusing on the tree as a living being, on trying to pay one's respect and in some manner make contact with an entity that is different from us and often overlooked. This act of addressing the tree, speaking to or with a tree, rather than as a tree or on behalf of a tree, I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>338</sup>

### *Other experiments with text*



*Dearest Pine Tree (with text)* (2021) video still

Rather than looking at writing as an action to be performed for the camera, as discussed above, we can think of the result of the writing, the text, and how to use it in combination with the videos. There are several practical decisions involved, such as adding the spoken text

338 For example, in the talk “Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees”, 30.3.21, *Knowledge in the Arts #2*, <https://artisticresearch.dk/en/activities/knowledge-in-the-arts-2-annette-arlander>



or written text to the video or next to it, or both in combination, as well as the problem of which language to use. For me, the options are Finnish, Swedish and English. In my very first experiments in adding text to a video,<sup>339</sup> I used a spoken text in Finnish and added the English translation as subtitles, because that seemed like the perfect combination of “exotic” effect and clarity of communication. The main reason was that I was not confident enough to use my broken English in the voiceover. Later, I came to accept that we all speak English in weird ways and have to try to understand each other as best we can. There is value in using Finnish, however, as a reminder of the diversity of languages that gets lost if we do not attend to them.

Another way of using text in video works is in the form of narratives that resemble interviews. This strategy I explored for the first time in Johannesburg, inviting persons to present a tree that was important to them, recording the voice of the person presenting the tree, and adding the narration to the soundtrack of the video of the tree. This strategy resembles a documentary or journalistic style that I have no previous experience with, and it seems rather clumsy if not done properly, that is, if not following the conventions we are accustomed to. Asking people about their trees was nevertheless an interesting and helpful approach. The videos with people presenting their trees<sup>340</sup> I have so far regarded more as material, not completed works, but they open up a whole new way of working with text. The possibilities presented by inviting people to tell stories about trees and to add those stories to images of those same trees could be

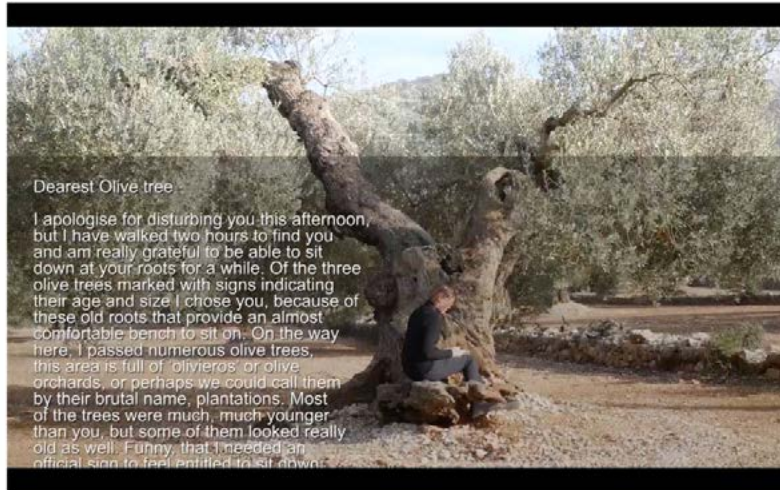
339 In *Sitting on a Rock (Rock with text)* (2003) 6 min. 28 sec. <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/istun-kivella-rock-with-text/>

340 The trees presented to me during the ARA residency in Johannesburg are listed on the project blog, with links to the actual videos <https://meetingswithtrees.com/ara/>

developed into an investigative way of working; it could be developed into a much more participatory mode by including the interviewees or informants or collaborators in the process and giving them the main role. I made some small experiments with this strategy later, during another residency, in Hailuoto.<sup>341</sup> At the moment, the challenges of writing and speaking the text added to the video myself is interesting enough, without bringing in other people to complicate matters, partly in order to keep the practice as light and mobile as possible, partly to be able to create the soundtrack myself. What style or character the added text could have is a question to be explored more in the future. Most of my experiments so far have involved using either the diary form, often with the exact time added to each note, or the letter form, addressed to my performing partner, the tree. Exploring the possibility of talking to the tree rather than writing to it is something worth exploring further. By speaking directly to the tree and recording the speech in that very moment, the “real action in real time” effect cherished by traditional performance art is accentuated and the improvisational character further emphasized.

341 See documentation of some presentations on Hailuoto on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1223364>

## Video essays



Dear Olive Tree, *Journal of Embodied Research* 4/2021 video still

When combining text and video, one can use essays or texts of a more academic nature as well, for example when including an academic paper based on material created for conference presentations in a video. An intermediate form is speaking an academic paper “live” on top of or in front of a video, using the video as a timing device and an illustration of sorts. One of my first experiments of this kind was a video essay called “Hanging in a Pine Tree or Appearing with Plants”. The text was originally planned to be spoken live with the time-lapse video *Hanging in a Pine*<sup>342</sup> projected in the background during a lecture performance that had a focus on ethical issues in performing with plants created for a performance

342 *Hanging in a Pine* (2019) 15 min. 28 sec. performed in Little Jan’s Wood in Stockholm between 15.2.2018 and 3.2.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026>

philosophy conference in Amsterdam in 2019.<sup>343</sup> In the end, I decided to insert the text as a voiceover on the video and presented the work as a video essay instead of a live lecture performance with a video background. Ideally, it would be published as a video essay, because the text and image are tightly interlinked, but the text can also stand on its own, as can the video. The text contains my first attempt at turning to the tree, addressing the tree as a partner at the end. The beginning of the voiceover transcript<sup>344</sup> can here serve as an example of my use of blog posts as material, as well as the way of linking text and image.

343 *Hanging in a pine – with text* (2019) 19 min. 31 sec. or “Hanging in a Pine Tree or Appearing with Plants” performance lecture/video essay at Performance Philosophy Research Festival and Conference, Intervention! Intoxication?, Amsterdam 14–17.3.2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026>

344 The notes in the original text are here changed to footnotes and some details in the language corrected.

### *Hanging in a pine tree or appearing with plants*



Hanging in a Pine (2019) video still

This video essay demonstrates and discusses how to perform with trees as an intervention into dominant notions of who and what can perform. Within our ongoing performance of trans-corporeal exchanges<sup>345</sup> with vegetation in the world, deliberate artistic performances can be developed to intervene in the continuous disregard for plants.

[Here the video shows the broken branch of the pine tree]

What happened to the branch?

In a blog post on 17 March 2018,<sup>346</sup> I wrote:

“[A] ... surprise..., almost a shock, awaited me on the top of the hill

<sup>345</sup> Alaimo 2010.

<sup>346</sup> “Shock or surprise?” blog post 17.3.2018 <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/2018/03/17/shock-or-surprise/>

by the pine tree. Somebody had broken my swinging branch! Well, the pine’s branch, that is, the branch I normally swing on and hang on was broken ... and the remains lay scattered on the ground... My first reaction was a rather paranoid one, that somebody had deliberately broken the branch to prevent me from continuing swinging on it, or even worse, in order to put a blame on me for hurting or damaging the tree. I immediately realized this was a rather far-fetched idea and examined the broken branch. I could still hang on it as usual; what exactly had happened? Pieces of the branch were lying on the ground as if after a battle. Could it be that somebody had looked at the images online and then wanted to try swinging themselves, but had grabbed the branch too far away near the tip, rather than close to the trunk? Not very likely, but somebody might have seen my repeated footsteps by the tree and therefore decided to try it out, but was much heavier than me, or was careless with the branch. That is perhaps the most likely explanation, but in each case, I have some ethical responsibility for what happened. Although the broken branch would not influence my practice in any catastrophic way, I felt deeply sad for the accident and somehow responsible for it.”

Despite the flourishing scientific research into plant sentience<sup>347</sup> and the attention being paid to the topic,<sup>348</sup> there is no way for me as a performer to know what a tree wants on anything but a very general level. How, then, to perform together in a reasonably ethical manner? How can we act or perform with creatures with whom we cannot communicate directly or even ask for their consent for posing for a camera with them? Ironically, in “performing with plants”

<sup>347</sup> Myers 2015.

<sup>348</sup> Wohlleben 2016.

I have tried to follow some basic rules of thumb:

- 1) Try not to hurt the plant – choose plants that are bigger than you, stronger than you, plants that can share some of their energy with you – like trees.
- 2) Visit the plant where it grows, respect its particular relationship to place.
- 3) Spend time with the plant, visit it repeatedly, and although you cannot share the temporality of the plant, respect its relationship to time.

In this case, the plant and co-performer is an old pine tree I visited repeatedly during one year, from 16 February 2018 to 4 February 2019, that is, the Chinese year of the dog, performing for a tripod-mounted camera with it. The pine grows on a hill in Lill-Jansögen or Little Jan's Wood, in the center of Stockholm, in an area popular with runners, walkers and dogs.

Unlike my usual manner of sitting in, on or with a tree as an immobile, faceless figure, in these performances with the pine I tried to first swing and then hang from a branch in order to explore movement – and that immediately brings attention to the human performer. While editing, I combined all swinging and hanging images to create two versions of the video. The hanging version is perhaps more in tune with the time of the pine than the swinging version, which really is an intervention<sup>349</sup> or interruption in tree time, if we can use such a term. Our collaboration is rather one-sided, however. The pine tree does not need me or anybody else to hang from its branch, but I do need the pine tree – in more ways than one – to be able to perform.

349 Becky Hilton pointed this out at the Stockholm Uniarts research week in January 2019.

The essay references further blog posts written during the process, which in turn mention other sources, for example Michael Pollan's book *The Botany of Desire*, which I quote concerning his summary of available stories about humans' relationship with nature:

There's the old heroic story, where Man is at war with Nature; the romantic version, where Man merges spiritually with Nature (usually with some help from the pathetic fallacy); and, more recently, the environmental morality tale, in which Nature pays Man back for his transgressions, usually in the coin of disaster – three different narratives (at least), yet all of them share a premise we know to be false but can't seem to shake: that we somehow stand outside, or apart from, nature.<sup>350</sup>

The essay also discusses in what way we could understand plants to be performing, referencing Michael Marder's idea of plants as artists, suggests that plants are appearing or occurring, and that we are appearing or on display together, the pine tree and I, that we perform intransitively, that we are being shown. And continues by asking:

Am I thus forcing the pine tree to join in the current selfie-culture, a continuous self-presentation, self-representation, self-entrepreneurship and investment in self-development in the hope of future gains? That seems like the opposite of the dispersed life of plants.

The idea of occurring or appearing with plants actually resonates with Marder's suggestion that "plants articulate in their language devoid of words ... [f]irst of all, themselves ... they reaffirm vegetal being, which, through them, becomes more spatially perva-

350 Pollan 2002, xxv.

sive”.<sup>351</sup> He notes how “plants articulate themselves with themselves” but they also “articulate the burgeoning emergence, or self-generated appearance” thus “demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself”.<sup>352</sup> If this is the case for plants, why not for human beings as well. Could I not try to appear and signify myself together with the pine?

Marder combines artistry with plants. “To assert that plants are the artists of sensuous appearances ... is to claim in the same breath that they are the artists of being. In effect, plants create and recreate themselves all the time ... They are performative creatures *par excellence*, the artists of themselves.” And more than that, they are the true experts in site-specificity, because “[v]egetal self-creation and self-recreation takes its cues from the conditions outside ... without a rigidly predetermined organismic plan. The artistry of plants that make themselves is, therefore, of one piece with the world.”<sup>353</sup>

In another blog post, I refer to a text called “The Wretched Earth – Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions”<sup>354</sup> and wonder whether hanging in a pine without explicitly taking a stand with regard to current practices of monocultural forestry, is utterly naive and pseudo-innocent. And then I turn to the pine directly:

Does this make sense to you, pine?

When looking at the images I realized that I hardly know you despite seeing you regularly, often three times a week for a whole year. I

351 Marder 2017, 120.

352 Marder 2017, 122.

353 Marder 2018, n.p.n.

354 An introduction to a special issue of *Third Text* vol. 32 (2018) by Ros Gray and Shela Sheikh.

have been placing my tripod on the rock nearby, framing the image according to the lines formed by some of your neighbors, trying to keep it constant from one session to the next, not always as exactly as I would have wished. And then swinging from your broken branch, moving my knees as much as possible to exaggerate the movement, then hanging for a few breaths, looking up through your crown. As an ending I always touched your trunk, as if to say “thank you” or “forgive me my intrusion” or something like that. But you never answered in any manner that I would understand. Not that I expected you to. And then I returned to the camera and stood there recording an image of you on your own for a while. The idea was to perform together, to pose for the camera together, to appear together in the image space. But I never really asked for your consent, or perhaps I asked, but did not wait for your reply. In the images you remain in the background, as a supporting structure, only partly visible. Most of you and all of your crown is actually cropped out of sight. My movement is catching the attention, actually on purpose; the vigorous or soft swinging of the human body carries the continuity from one meeting to the next, across shifts in framing, changes in light and the passing seasons. It is nevertheless strange that I know so little about you. Sometimes I wondered about the red mark on your trunk, was it something accidentally painted there, or to mark the path, or was it a sign that marked you for felling, like the ones they used in timber marking. Nowadays they mark the ones to be saved, I hear.

In hindsight, this turning to the pine and addressing the tree directly was a significant change in approach. I ended the essay with a further quote from the blog:

After my last visits to Lill-Jansskogen, on February 3,<sup>355</sup> I encountered another kind of surprise:

“... when I wanted to add the images recorded in January, I realized the session recorded on 25th January, the one with heavy snowfall, was missing. The still-images captured from the videos were there in the folder where they should be, but the video clips were nowhere to be found. I looked in all likely and unlikely folders... the other external hard drives, no! I must have destroyed them by mistake, how irritatingly stupid of me! I tried to insert the still-images in the video, and of course that could be done...”

[Here the movement of the video is interrupted with a still image]

Was that how you felt when losing your branch? Or did it hurt more, like breaking a nail? Or even worse, like breaking a bone? In any case you probably sensed it somehow ... and the truly pathetic, bizarre, fallacy is imagining that you would not mind.

When planning to present the above essay as part of a lecture performance, I thought of literally bringing the branch into the room, perhaps holding it in my hands while speaking. When deciding to record the text and to add it as a voiceover to the video, thereby creating a video essay of sorts, I abandoned the idea and did not include any live performance beyond an introduction to the screening.<sup>356</sup> In

355 “Last Visits to Lill-Jansskogen”, blog post 3.2.2019 <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/2019/02/03/last-visits-to-lill-jansskogen/>

356 The video essay is available on the RC <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026> and on vimeo <https://vimeo.com/357086914>

the context of Performing with Plants, some of my other conference presentations could have been developed into video essays by adding the paper as a voiceover to the video. “Hanging in a Pine or Appearing with Plants” is nevertheless an example of the mixture of styles and materials that the video essay allows for.

### *A sermon with a pine*



*The Pine Revisited* (2019) video still

The video essay as a form allows for fictional approaches as well. In other contexts, especially in the research project How to Do Things with Performance (HTDTWP), together with Hanna Järvinen, Tero Nauha and Pilvi Porkola, I explored more theatrical techniques. Within that project, I have returned to the sites of former performances for the camera on Harakka Island and created video compilations of old and new footage recorded on the same site, with or without more or less academic text added to the video compilations. An experiment in this genre, developed in a more theatrical and fictional direction connected to performing with trees, was a performance created for a Society for Artistic Research conference in

Plymouth in 2018. We called our stage performance “Regurgitated Perspectives”,<sup>357</sup> playing with the theme of the conference, “artistic research will eat itself”. The part of the performance called “A Sermon” consisted of a semi-academic speech by the preacher, performed by me, in front of a video projection of the video *The Pine Revisited*.<sup>358</sup> The extract from the script is here presented in its original form.<sup>359</sup> The irony and rhetoric of the text is related to the theme of the conference and the show, while my specific interest and personal concern, the problem of “performing with”, is discussed as a general issue of interdependence. Although academic in substance and content, the text is written to be spoken in character in a fictive situation on stage. When presented here, however, the academic substance can hopefully be retrieved and considered as such.

#### A Sermon

(The video *The Pine Revisited*, 16 min. 36 sec., is projected onto the screen, accompanied by THE CANTOR on Theremin.)

THE PREACHER (standing at the podium):

Let us now congregate around the scriptures.

Eating others or making honey? Cannibalism increases the risk of prion diseases, like the mad cow disease. Thus, we might find it safer

357 The script for “Regurgitated Perspectives” was published in the proceedings of the conference “Artistic Research will Eat Itself”, available online as a PDF <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/512748/512749>

358 The video *The Pine Revisited* (2018) 16 min. 36 sec. records a revisit on 28 February 2018 to the site where the *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007) was performed in 2006 and combines that video, as well as *Day and Night of the Dog* (2007) inserted into it <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=452458>

359 The notes in parenthesis are here transformed into footnotes according to the style of the rest of the text.

to eat others. But this is not as easy as it sounds, because others are not separate from us. Physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad suggests that “bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity, its performativity” and acquire “boundaries, properties, and meanings ... through the intra-activity of mattering”.<sup>360</sup> “Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement”, she writes, “that affects an *agential cut* between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted)”.<sup>361</sup> Differentiating is not about radical exteriorities, she adds: “what is on the other side of the agential cut is never separate from us.”<sup>362</sup> This goes for artistic research as well, for cuts between artistic research and other forms of research, or other kinds of artistic practice, between the artist as subject and the artist as object, the one who eats and the one to be eaten and so on. Is this becoming too complicated? We could rather try to think in terms of sympoiesis, in the words of Donna Haraway:

Perhaps as sensual molecular curiosity and definitely as insatiable hunger, irresistible attraction toward enfolding each other is the vital motor of living and dying on earth. Critters interpenetrate each other, loop around and through one another, eat each other, get indigestion, and partially digest and partly assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages.<sup>363</sup>

360 Barad 2012, 69.

361 Barad 2007, 139–140.

362 Barad 2012, 69.

363 Haraway 2016, 58.

Cows and other ruminants regurgitate half-digested food in order to chew it a second time. This is what artistic researchers generally are asked to do, to chew their cud. The recommended mode of rumination is usually reflexivity, or critical self-reflection, to avoid narcissistic self-promotion. The Skylla to that Charybdis is drowning in a vortex of reflexivity. Indeed, following Haraway and Barad, we might choose diffraction rather than reflection as a safer tool.

Diffraction as a concept owes as much to the feminist theorizing about difference as to physics,<sup>364</sup> where in its classical form it is understood as the result of the superposition or interference of waves.<sup>365</sup> In quantum physics diffraction experiments are “at the heart of the ‘wave versus particle’ debates about the nature of light and matter”<sup>366</sup> and have shown how “wave and particle are not inherent attributes of objects but”, interestingly, “the atoms perform wave or particle in their intra-action with the apparatus”.<sup>367</sup> As a methodology diffraction was used by Donna Haraway as a counterpoint to reflection. For Karen Barad it is, among other things, “a tool for thinking about social/natural practices in a performative rather than representationalist mode”.<sup>368</sup> Thinking diffractively can thus imply a self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world, while reading diffractively can mean reading texts “through one another” to produce unexpected outcomes, as suggested by Geerts and van der Tuin (2016). Rather than “a boundary-crossing, trans/disciplinary methodology”, which is “blurring the boundaries between different disciplines and the-

364 Barad 2014, 168.

365 Barad 2007, 78–79.

366 Barad 2007, 72–73.

367 Barad 2014, 180.

368 Barad 2007, 88.

ories to provoke new thoughts”,<sup>369</sup> we could perhaps understand diffractive reading in the tradition of artistic cut-ups<sup>370</sup> as various forms, combinations or collages of texts, images, video clips, memories and experiences.

If honeybees produce honey by a process of regurgitation, could we hope that chewing one’s cud as an artist could produce something equally valuable? The video you see here explores reflexivity and repetition in artistic research by recording a visit to the site of *Year of the Dog*, on Harakka Island in Helsinki on 28 February 2018. *Year of the Dog* was performed and recorded approximately once a week from 7 January 2006 to 11 February 2007 and it is one of the works in the series *Animal Years* (2003–2014), based on repeated weekly visits to a site on that island each year. *Day and Night of the Dog* was performed in the same pine tree for a day and night with two-hour intervals from noon to noon on October 20–21 in 2006, that same year. These old video works are inserted, first the year, then the day and night, in the recently recorded real-time sequence.

While sitting in the pine, the branches of which had grown so vigorously during twelve years, that sitting proved rather uncomfortable, I tried to remember my previous experiences, without much success. What I did remember were some thoughts I recently read by Anna Tsing in her groundbreaking study *The Mushroom at The End of the World – On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins* (2015), where pine trees are key figures together with matsutake mushrooms. She describes how “pines, matsutake and humans all cultivate each other unintentionally. They make each other’s world-mak-

369 Geerts and van der Tuin 2016, n.p.n.

370 Burroughs and Gysin 1978.



ing projects possible”.<sup>371</sup> For her “landscapes more generally are products of unintentional design”, they are “overlapping world-making activities of many agents, human and not human”. Although the “design is clear in the landscape’s ecosystem... none of the agents have planned this effect”.<sup>372</sup> According to Tsing “humans join others in making landscapes of unintentional design”.<sup>373</sup> She writes:

As sites for more-than-human dramas, landscapes are radical tools for decentering human hubris. Landscapes are not backdrops for historical action: they are themselves active. Watching landscapes in formation shows humans joining other living beings in shaping worlds. Matsutake and pine don’t just grow in forests; they make forests. Matsutake forests are gatherings that build and transform landscapes.<sup>374</sup>

The group of pine trees that has grown during these twelve years near the old pine on Harakka Island is perhaps not a forest, and there are no matsutake mushrooms anywhere near the area as far as I know. Tsing’s idea of humans and others cultivating each other unintentionally, seems to make sense, however. She refers to human dependence of other life forms, “we proudly independent humans are unable to digest our food without helpful bacteria, first gained as we slide out of the birth canal”.<sup>375</sup> There are more bacteria than cells in the human body, and they are necessary for us. Tsing refers to biologist Scott Gilbert and his colleagues, who claim that “almost all development may be codevelopment. By codevel-

371 Tsing 2015, 152.

372 Ibid.

373 Ibid.

374 Ibid.

375 Tsing 2015, 142.

opment we refer to the ability of the cells of one species to assist the normal construction of the body of another species”.<sup>376</sup> “This insight changes the unit of evolution,” Tsing writes. “Some biologists have begun to speak of the ‘holobiont theory of evolution’, referring to the complex of organisms and their symbionts as an evolutionary unit: the ‘holobiont’”,<sup>377</sup> she adds. Tsing describes how, in order to emphasize development, “Gilbert and his colleagues use the term ‘symbiopoiesis’, the codevelopment of the holobiont”, in contrast “with an earlier focus of life as internally self-organizing systems, self-formed through ‘autopoiesis’”.<sup>378</sup> “‘More and more’, they write, ‘symbiosis appears to be the “rule”, not the exception... Nature may be selecting ‘relationships’ rather than individuals or genomes’”.<sup>379</sup> Tsing summarizes her view on codevelopment and contingency: “Interspecies relations draw evolution back into history because they depend on the contingencies of encounter.” Moreover, “interspecies encounters are always events, ‘things that happen’, the units of history.” Events “cannot be counted on in the way self-replicating units can; they are always framed by contingency and time”.<sup>380</sup>

And now, let us listen to some examples of the myriad voices of the world:

(the sound of wind and a voice in Finnish, with English subtitles, from the video accompanied by THE CANTOR with live sound of theremin).

376 Gilbert quoted in Tsing 2015, 142.

377 Tsing 2015, 142.

378 Ibid.

379 Gilbert quoted in Tsing 2015, 142.

380 Tsing 2015, 142.

The video compilation in the background included my spoken notes in Finnish, which were part of the original video *Day and Night of the Dog*.<sup>381</sup> The above text was never added to the video to create a video essay like I did with several other similar revisits to the performance sites on Harakka Island, probably because it was an integral part of the performance and would not really stand on its own, I thought. Later, I discussed some of the themes elsewhere, such as the relationship of reflection and diffraction as a methodology, related to performing with plants.<sup>382</sup> Considering the text in the context of performing with trees, one important theme is the emphasis on symbiosis, symbiopoiesis<sup>383</sup> or sympoiesis.<sup>384</sup> We could say that “performing with” is actually our primary mode of behaving and becoming, not something that requires an exceptional effort.

381 *Day and Night of the Dog* (2006) 4 min. 10 sec. performed on Harakka Island between 20.10 at 12.15 and 21.10. at 12.15 in 2006, with two-hour intervals <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/koiran-vuorokausi/>

382 Arlander 2021a.

383 Gilbert quoted in Tsing 2015, 142.

384 Haraway 2016, 58.

### *Revisiting the juniper*



*Revisiting the Juniper* (2019) video still

Another example of a mixture between a video essay and a lecture performance was included in the contribution made by HTDTWP to CARPA 6 (Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts) in 2019, a performance at Kiasma theater called “HTDTWP presents: The Transformative Potential of Performance”.<sup>385</sup> The part of the performance relevant to this discussion was called “Revisiting the Juniper”, in which I performed a still-act in front of a video projection. This time, the text was added as a voiceover to the video, and my live contribution consisted of standing covered in a green shawl in front of the projection as a parallel figure to the one depicted on the video. In my speech, I address the juniper, describe the revisit and the process of creating the original video works, and discuss decolonizing our relationship to nature. The text is includ-

385 A brief summary of the performance was published in the proceedings (Arlander, Järvinen, Nauha, Porkola 2020), including a link to the video and the transcript of the text on the RC: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/727848/727849>

ed here in full,<sup>386</sup> although I have used sections of it elsewhere<sup>387</sup> to illustrate the mixture of literary or semifictional and academic modes of writing. This time the fictive dimension does not involve speaking in or as a character but rather personifying the addressee, the juniper.

Dear Juniper,

It was nice to see you again four weeks ago, on the first of August, there on the eastern shore of Harakka Island, and to see that you are healthy and strong. The old guy that used to grow to the west from you, leaning heavily, had completely disappeared. When I looked among the shrubs, I saw some pieces of dry wood – all that remained. But on the eastern side (to the left in the image,) a large fresh juniper was now growing strong; your offspring I assume. The birch behind you was not looking good, however, obviously suffering from drought; there is not much water on the cliffs if there is no rain.

To remember our time together in 2011 I have inserted some videos in the recording of the revisit this year. On the left is *Year of the Rabbit – By the Bird Shed*, and in the centre *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper*, both performed weekly for a year on Sundays at 3 pm between February 6, 2011 and January 22, 2012 (with some breaks due to travels, though). On the right is *Day and Night of the Rabbit – In the Year of the Dragon*, which was performed for a day and night from 16 June 2012 at 1 pm to 17 June at 1 pm every three hours.

As part of the research project *How to Do Things with Performance* I have returned to the sites where the series *Animal Years* was performed and recorded on the island, as my colleagues and

<sup>386</sup> The notes are here changed to footnotes.

<sup>387</sup> The discussion of decolonization is included in the ARA publication (Arlander 2020d).

many of those who have followed our work well know by now. Now was the turn of the site of the juniper, your site, which I visited during the year of the rabbit, in 2011.

Visiting you was one of my favourite years – no, I am not saying it to be polite, it is absolutely true, because I continued visiting junipers and juniper-like shrubs even during the following year, when I was supposed to call for dragons. I really liked holding hands with you, or other junipers, too, holding on to your trunk or a branch, and I loved covering myself with the scarf, hiding there, breathing slowly and feeling protected, “sticking my head into the bush” as the saying goes in Finnish.

And with you I wrote my first blog, which has turned into an activity I often engage with. I have used our performances together as an example when writing about the performativity of blogging, of becoming juniper as artistic research and even when discussing authorship. I am now working on another research project, too, called *Performing with Plants*, which somehow began with you, or perhaps even earlier, with a pine tree, but anyway I became more conscious of the possibilities through my contact with you. Thus, revisiting you seemed special and important. In preparation I checked the length of the original video, 20 minutes, and put my phone to warn me after 25 minutes. Only when standing next to you did I realize that 25 minutes would be too long. And then I remembered that my camera would stop by itself after 21 minutes – how can I always forget that! I started counting my breaths to get approximately twenty minutes and, when I returned to the camera it had stopped. So, I recorded another session, slightly shorter, to be able to include the exit as well.

Anyway, it was easy to spend time with you, you were somehow open to my holding on to you and there was a place to stand among the heather next to you. Only while looking at the material

did I realize that I am hardly distinguishable behind your branches. Funny, because I was worried that my lemon outfit would be too domineering..

I realize that speaking to you here like this is slightly absurd in many ways, first of all because you are not here, and many people listening to me would be familiar with the principle “nothing about us, without us” or *nihil de nobis, sine nobis*, if you prefer Latin. That means officially that “no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy”. Well, we are not deciding any policy here, but for the sake of principle... There have been attempts at dealing with the problem for example by Bruno Latour and his idea of the parliament of things and other related endeavours. Coming from performance art I tend to distrust all kinds of representational strategies, somebody speaking as somebody else or on behalf of somebody else, and so on. Although I don’t know for sure, I have a hunch that you would distrust them, too. Since we are on stage right now, we can perhaps rely on a little bit of willing suspension of disbelief, as it is called by theatre people, and allow me to speak with you, or actually to you, without you being here with us, except in the form of a representation. I realize I also risk being accused of mansplaining, or “woman-splaining” – it cannot really be called “plant-splaining” I guess, because I am the one explaining in a potentially condescending or patronizing manner.

Nevertheless, you might be delighted to hear that in recent years there has been a great increase in the scientific study of plant learning, plant memory, plant thinking and some scientists, but not all, are now even willing to speak of plant intelligence. There is also something called critical plant studies, which according to the description of the lead editor of a book series with the same name,

Michael Marder, has as its goal “to initiate an interdisciplinary dialogue, whereby philosophy and literature would learn from each other to think about, imagine, and describe vegetal life with critical awareness, conceptual rigor, and ethical sensitivity”.<sup>388</sup> Well, we are not dealing with philosophy or literature in a strict sense here but rather something called artistic research, but it is nice to know that there is a wider context, isn’t it?

When I looked for the material from the time of our regular meetings, I found a text I had written for the exhibition where these works were shown for the first time, in the now no-longer existing gallery Jangva in January 2013.

How to perform landscape, not only represent it? Can you have a meaningful relationship with a singular element in the landscape? How can you relate to a living being that you do not easily recognize as your kind? A plant is hard to see as a partner in interaction although plants are actually our collaborators with regard to production of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Plants are our allies, since they, via their photosynthesis, produce the basic ingredients of our food. They are the true creators of our world. There is a kind of symbiotic relationship between plants and animals, in this case a shrub and a human being. Most plants are stationary, reliable to be there for us. A plant knows what it means to be site-specific. A certain shrub in a particular place is an entity with a distinguishable individuality, something to relate to and to visit. During the year of the rabbit 2011 I chose a juniper growing in the south-eastern part of Harakka Island to acquaint myself with and as my partner within the project

388 See [https://brill.com/view/serial/CPST?qt-qt\\_serial\\_details=1](https://brill.com/view/serial/CPST?qt-qt_serial_details=1)

“Year of the Rabbit with a Juniper”. A juniper seemed to me a strange creature comparable with the hare in Arto Paasilinna’s novel, together with whom I could search for a new contact with the environment. I ended up visiting the juniper once a week and “holding hands” with it wrapped in a green scarf. I invited passers-by and colleagues to witness my performance and wrote a blog about the project.<sup>389</sup> While travelling I encountered other junipers to make acquaintance with. In the Turku archipelago and in South Häme I found handsome junipers and later I looked for them in Ireland, Sardinia and Ibiza. In the year 2012 I have spent time with junipers as well. Am I perhaps “becoming juniper”?

In the volume of a publication called *Emergency Index*, which documents performances that took place in 2011, I described the work in a slightly different manner. But I will not go into that now, but rather focus on the question I promised to discuss, which should be of some interest for you, too, dear Juniper: Could expanding the idea of who or what performs assist in decolonizing our relationship to the environment, to everything else around us?

The possibility to understand performing as appearing, as “esiintyä” rather than “esittää”, to use the intransitive and transitive forms in Finnish, I have addressed elsewhere.<sup>390</sup> So, let us begin with “decolonizing” instead.

In one of her last texts, “Decolonizing relationships with nature” in 2003 environmental philosopher and ecofeminist activist Val Plumwood analyses the logical structure of colonial, anthropocentric and Eurocentric relationships. She describes the Eurocentric

389 See <http://aa-katajankanssa.blogspot.com/>

390 Arlander 2019a, 2019f.

colonial system as “one of hegemony – a system of power relations in which the interests of the dominant party were disguised as universal and mutual, but in which the colonizer actually prospered at the expense of the colonized”.<sup>391</sup> She draws on her experience from both sides of the colonizing relationships and notes “that many of us experience them from both sides and that they can mislead, distort and impoverish both the colonized and the centre – not just the obvious losers”.<sup>392</sup> This is something I can relate to as a Finn, a Finnish Swede and a European, and not only in relationship to you, dear Juniper.

Plumwood notes that “the concept of colonization can be applied directly to non-human nature itself, and that the relationship between [certain groups of] humans ... and the more-than-human world might be ... characterized as one of colonization”.<sup>393</sup> She reminds us how “the sphere of ‘nature’ has, in the past, been taken to include what are thought of as less ideal more primitive forms of the human”.<sup>394</sup> Progress has meant “the progressive overcoming, or control of, this ‘barbarian’ non-human or semi-human sphere by the rational sphere of European culture and ‘modernity’”.<sup>395</sup> According to her the “Eurocentric form of anthropocentrism draws upon and parallels Eurocentric imperialism in its logical structure” such as a “moral dualism, involving a major gulf between the ‘One’ and the ‘Other’ that cannot be bridged or crossed”.<sup>396</sup>

391 Plumwood 2003, 51.

392 Plumwood 2003, 52.

393 Ibid.

394 Ibid.

395 Plumwood 2003, 52–53.

396 Plumwood 2003, 53.

Plumwood provides an account of some of the mechanisms that characterize both colonial and anthropocentric approaches to the other, which include a strong focus on dualism, exaggerating differences and denying commonality as well as homogenizing the other. One mechanism is hyper-separation or radical exclusion: “The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment,”<sup>397</sup> she writes. Moreover, “from an anthropocentric standpoint, nature is a hyper-separate lower order, lacking any real continuity with the human. This approach stresses heavily those features that make humans different from nature and animals, rather than those we share with them”,<sup>398</sup> she adds. Another mechanism is homogenization or stereotyping, seeing the Other “not [as] an individual, but a member of a class stereotyped as interchangeable, replaceable, all alike – that is, as homogenous”.<sup>399</sup> Consequently, “[a]nthropocentric culture conceives of nature and animals as all alike in their lack of consciousness, which is assumed to be exclusive to the human”.<sup>400</sup>

Plumwood summarizes: “These two features of human/nature dualism – radical exclusion and homogenization – work together to produce, in anthropocentric culture, a polarized understanding in which the human and non-human spheres correspond to two quite different substances or orders of being in the world”.<sup>401</sup>

So, even though I stand next to you, dear Juniper, and hold on to you and intellectually know that I depend on you and your kind, I am to some extent the result of the material-discursive practices of a colonial legacy, which sees humans “as the only rational spe-

397 Plumwood 2003, 54.

398 Ibid.

399 Plumwood 2003, 55.

400 Ibid.

401 Ibid.

cies, the only real subjectivities and agents in the world”, whereas you, and everything else is “nature”, “a background... that is there to be exploited”, to provide me with a healthy “forest-bathing experience”, material for gin or jenever, or perhaps stuff for fairy tales. – Not so good...

In a recent book, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), Mignolo presents the idea of nature as one of the three pillars of the colonial matrix, together with racism and sexism. According to Mignolo “Western imperial subjects secured themselves and their descendants as the superior subspecies” and “invented ... the idea of *nature* to separate their bodies from all living ... organisms on the planet.”<sup>402</sup> Thus, “the invention of nature and the degradation of life” is “one more facet in the procedural constitution of the human”,<sup>403</sup> he writes. “Nature doesn’t exist, or it exists as an ontological fiction”,<sup>404</sup> he adds.

According to Mignolo “nature and culture are two Western fictions... [...] How to get out of them is a decolonial question”.<sup>405</sup> For Mignolo “[d]ecolonial thinking is akin to nonmodern ways of thinking grounded on cosmologies of *complementary dualities* (and/and) rather than *dichotomies* or *contradictory dualities* (either/or)”.<sup>406</sup> In Andean philosophy, for example, there is an understanding of duality as complementarity, resembling the Chinese yin and yang ... he explains; “they have in common the acknowledgement that there cannot be A without its opposite B. Once you acknowledge that

402 Mignolo 2018, 158–159.

403 Mignolo 2018, 159.

404 Mignolo 2018, 158.

405 Mignolo 2018, 160.

406 Mignolo 2018, 155.

these entities are inseparable ... you have at least two options”,<sup>407</sup> he writes. “If you try to eliminate and control the opposite, you enter the realm of war; if you seek harmony and balance, you enter the realm of struggle, weaving relations (Convivencia, vincularidad) with all that exists,” he adds, “rocks and mountains; spirits and plants; plants and mountains that are spirits; animals who do not speak Kechua, Hebrew, Latin or any other of the known languages; and animals who do speak one or more languages”.<sup>408</sup>

Admittedly, dear Juniper, it would be a struggle if we would try to really understand each other. By standing next to you and holding on to you I am not communicating with you in any detailed way... But I am trying to establish a relation, some form of “vincularidad”, perhaps. But I am not thinking of you as a spirit or power, as my ancestors might have done. Although in Finnish and Nordic folklore people respect junipers mostly because some kind of, “haltija”, or little people would live under the juniper, and later also because your branches or berries could be used for protection against evil spirits. – Perhaps I am disrespectful and colonizing when forcing you to perform with me like this, and to contribute to my artwork without any recompense?

In another recent study, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2017) T. J. Demos brings art into the debate. He writes: “I’m convinced that there is nothing more important, timely and urgent to consider as our present ecological crises, and in this regard, we can only do so by starting from our bases in our respective fields”,<sup>409</sup> which for him means art history. “Under cur-

407 Mignolo 2018, 160.

408 Ibid.

409 Demos 2017, 29.

rent forms of governance,” he notes, “our relation to the environment threatens our coming existence, where not only nature is colonized but also our very future, a colonization that we must all struggle to resist.”<sup>410</sup>

Demos explains: “To decolonize nature represents a doubtlessly ambitious and manifold project, with artists, activists, and creative practitioners (in addition to scientists, policy makers, and politicians) involved at every stage.”<sup>411</sup> Moreover, “[b]eyond the critical analysis of corporate practice and the international framework of trade policies that privilege economy over environment”, he adds, “we also need to decolonize our conceptualization of nature in properly political ways”.<sup>412</sup> He admits that the conventional definition of nature, “positioned as an ahistoric monolith in a separate realm apart from the human” appears “faulty for its basis in ontological objectification and dualistic thinking” and serves as “the conceptual platform for extractivist practice”.<sup>413</sup> “Yet” for Demos “rejecting the term nature is not an option”, even while he agrees “with efforts geared towards its conceptual reorientation”.<sup>414</sup>

Demos notes the need for “new methodologies to acknowledge the voices of historically oppressed peoples” in order “to strengthen the basis of ethico-political solidarity around ecological concerns by joining with current struggles for cultural and environmental survival against corporate globalization”.<sup>415</sup> And he seems to have great confidence in the transformative power of art: “I am convinced that art, given its long histories of experimentation, imaginative

410 Demos 2017, 29.

411 Demos 2017, 16.

412 Demos 2017, 18.

413 Demos 2017, 20.

414 Ibid.

415 Demos 2017, 23–24.

invention, and radical thinking, can play a central transformative role here”,<sup>416</sup> he adds. “In its most ambitious and far-ranging sense, art holds the promise of initiating” perceptual “and philosophical shifts, offering new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature”.<sup>417</sup>

Well, I wish I could be equally confident. But we have to try. And, thinking of resisting the colonization of the future and doing so by starting from our bases in our respective fields, I must say, dear Juniper, that you are doing it quite well.

This video essay was part of a live performance and was greatly influenced by the stage setup, as well as the larger performance it was a part of, which included an introduction, four very different solo parts and a sound quartet as a collaborative ending.<sup>418</sup> The video essay can nevertheless be watched independently,<sup>419</sup> and its main points can probably be transmitted through the text as well.

416 Demos 2017, 18.

417 Demos 2017, 18–19.

418 A short presentation of the performance <https://nivel.teak.fi/carpa6/annette-arlander-hanna-jarvinen-tero-nauha-and-pilvi-porkola-htdtwp-presents-the-transformative-potential-of-performance/>

419 The video and the transcript of the text on the RC: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/727848/727849>

### *Video essay as a tool*



*Dear Deceased* (2020) video still

To what extent does a text in a video essay function differently from a text read on its own? On the one hand, there is a difference in hearing a text spoken rather than reading it, and on the other hand there is the added effect of the combination of sound and image, a topic discussed extensively, for example, in film studies and beyond the scope of my concerns here. The video essay is nevertheless easily associated with the essay film, which is mostly characterized by the work of prominent authors like Chris Marker and Trinh T. Minh-ha, rather than any defining traits. The autobiographical accounts of documentary filmmakers influence viewers’ expectations of a video essay as well. Essay film has been discussed as a genre of its own, alongside documentary film and feature film, with strong links to the literary essay,<sup>420</sup> while the experimental nature of the essay film has been contrasted with the general expectations of the autobiograph-

420 Corrigan 2011, 5.



ical and subjective nature of essay films.<sup>421</sup> With digitalization and the internet, the essay film has experienced a comeback, and there have been discussions concerning videographic essays, including works consciously connected to the tradition of the essay, as well as a new type that could be called illustrated talks or lectures.<sup>422</sup> From the point of view of artistic research, it is interesting to note this new videographic tendency of “blurring of the demarcating line that separates the theoretical from the artistic practice of filmmaking”.<sup>423</sup> The tension between word and image, and the power relation between explanatory knowledge and essayistic thinking, often leaves the videographic essay as a thinking mode, “as a form that thinks” in need of support by an explanatory note from the author or some form of curatorial contextualization.<sup>424</sup>

It is worth noting that by speaking of video essays, I am not necessarily connecting my work to the filmic tradition or to the essay film but rather to the more open tradition of moving image in visual art. The video essays, or rather the textual parts of the video essays exemplified previously, are not moving-image works in the strict sense but use moving image as technology, and they are of course linked to the general upsurge in videographic essays due to digitalization and the internet. In the same vein as the literary essay (which is a multifaceted genre: on the one hand a sophisticated literary form, while on the other hand something that students write as assignments), both a poetic video work and an illustrated conference paper can be called a video essay. Like written language, video is a tool, and as such is no more transparent or neutral than language. Although cinema, television and other uses of moving images create various

421 Papazian & Eades 2016, 5.

422 Arsenljuk 2016, 292.

423 Arsenljuk 2016, 283.

424 Arsenljuk 2016, 294.

expectations of the use of video, these expectations need not be met if one is willing to take the risk of seeming unprofessional. In many cases, it might nevertheless be clarifying to speak of video articles.

Unlike some of my other experiments, the examples presented above all include a literary aspect that probably warrants the use of the term “video essay”. They are strongly dependent on the video artworks they contain or build upon, which also have a specific character due to their time-lapse aesthetic. The two latter examples, the video *The Pine Revisited* with the “sermon” accompanying it and the video *Revisiting the Juniper*, are compilations of old video works inserted into recently recorded video material from the same site and could be considered video essays even without the added text. The texts combine personal reflections, aesthetic considerations, factual information and detailed references and thus resemble traditional literary essays. Perhaps more important than the label is the mixture of materials and the hybrid character, which seems well suited to reporting artistic research results, because those results are often mixtures or hybrids themselves: part artwork, part scholarly text, part critical reflection and part imaginary play.

Besides the connection to filmic traditions, these video essays can be viewed as performance documentation. In his introduction to the anthology *Documenting Performance* (2017), editor Toni Sant maintains that documentation is more than the production of documents or preservation of documentary residue; it is a process of turning a collection into an archive that provides long-term access to documents.<sup>425</sup> Ben Spatz’s article in that anthology, “What do we document? Dense video and the epistemology of practice”, argues that the video essay constitutes a practice of sharing similar to the public performance and also similar to the scholarly article. His main

425 Sant 2017, 2.

interest is in describing, developing, sharing and archiving various physical performance techniques – and video clearly is a useful tool for that – but his notion of “dense video” has relevance to the use of video in other contexts as well. He compares dense video with dense text, suggesting “the density of a document to be the richness of information found in any given frame or excerpt” and explains how the “density of prose can be increased by the use of footnotes, parenthetical annotations, citations and references, specialized language” and other “textual complexities that tend to distinguish academic writing from popular non-fiction”.<sup>426</sup> According to Spatz, similar techniques can be developed for video, starting with “a simple linear video ... consisting of a single take, an uninterrupted recording that documents a moment of practice”. He suggests that at least two basic metadata are needed: “a title frame – identifying the author, practitioners, location, and date – and continuous time code (essential for stable referencing)”. And that is only the minimum: “there are myriad ways in which the density of a video document might be increased”.<sup>427</sup>

Adding explanatory voiceover is a technique used in many anthropological and documentary films. There is a rich tradition of essay films beyond the documentary tradition,<sup>428</sup> and the layering of autobiographical video imagery has been explored by Pekka Kantonen,<sup>429</sup> for example. My technique is more basic, using, on the one hand, simple time-lapse videos – repeating the same image, sometimes for long periods of time – and on the other hand, inserting those videos into an image from the same site, thus juxtaposing images “then” and “now”. Both are techniques for “densifying” a video that can be used both for artistic and academic purposes or any mixtures of them.

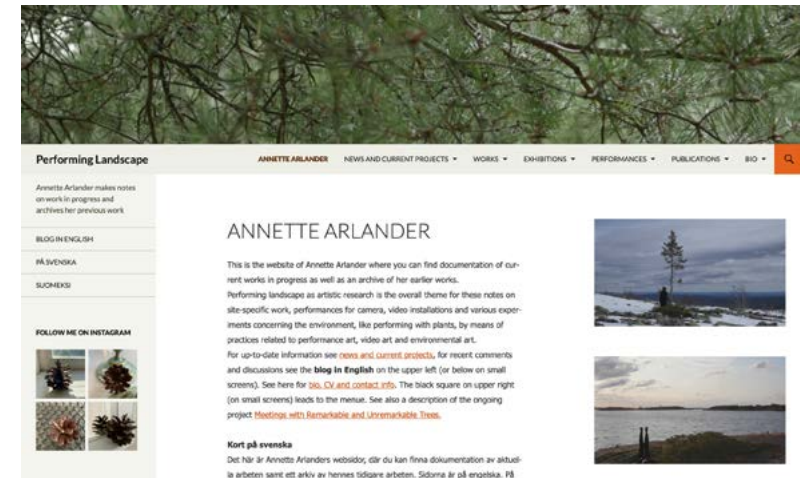
426 Spatz 2017, 246–247.

427 Spatz 2017, 247.

428 Corrigan 2011.

429 Kantonen 2017.

## Media formats



Screenshot of webpage

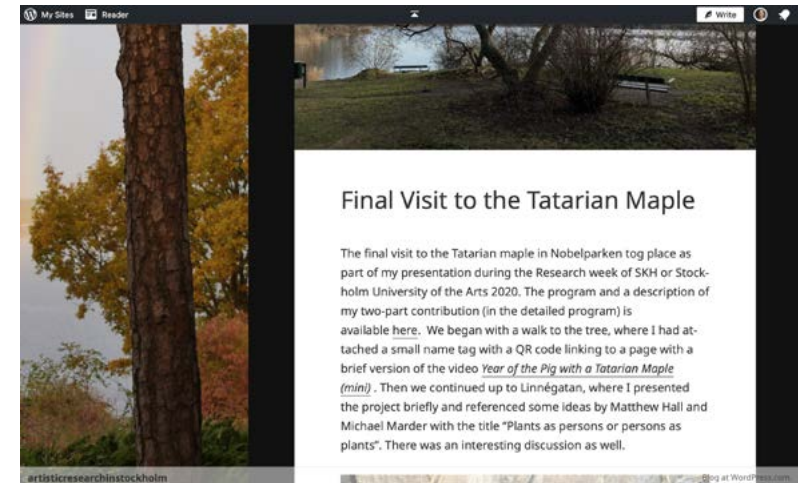
Performance is often a way to distribute art, not only a tool for producing it, as in the strategies I have discussed in the previous sections. A musical composition, a theater play or a dance choreography is presented night after night for new audiences. Performance art, on the contrary, is often conceived of as happening only once and often of being produced in the moment it is presented. Performances for camera form an exception, if they are recorded as video works and do not take place only live online. They can easily be distributed and archived and also manipulated. Most of my works belong to this category. They are video works, even though they are produced by performing for the camera and are supposed to be distributed and archived as such, ideally either in screenings or as installations. The video works – the main artistic results of the projects *Performing with Plants* and *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* – are intended for display in exhibitions, although a very small part of all the videos have ended up on display in that way, at least so

far; a central output was actually a photobook.<sup>430</sup> The video essays or academic articles are published in journals. Other channels for sharing and archiving work during the process have proved increasingly important, however. In the previous section, when discussing various strategies for and aspects of performing with trees, I repeatedly referred to the project archive on the Research Catalogue and sometimes to the Distribution Center for Finnish Media Art, AV-arkki, as well as to my blogs. These have been the main channels for archiving and publishing my work during the project.

Experimenting with the use of social media has been part of the project from the start of *Performing with Plants*. Despite the fact that I am not an avid user of social media, neither as producer or consumer, I was eager to share my work while it was ongoing and was curious to try out various platforms as the basis for separate art projects and diaries of sorts. Rather than focusing on the social function, my initial main interest was in a kind of journaling and archiving. The most important platforms I have used in the project are blog posts as field notes and the Research Catalogue as a project archive. From the beginning, I also created a diary of one image a day on Tumblr, calling it “Year one with plants”, and have continued during subsequent years with “Year two with plants” and “Year three with plants”, as well as “Meetings with trees”. A more irregular project has consisted of images on Instagram, first of a seed ball, then a pinecone and recently of meetings with trees. The most recent additions to these projects – one project per platform – have been daily images of bark on Flickr. In the following, I will describe my experiments with these media or tools one at a time and try to consider their specificities as well.

430 *Att Uppträda med Träd – Performing with Trees*, published by SKH (Arlander 2019g). It is not a photobook in the strict sense, however, because the images are all video-stills.

### *Blog posts as field notes*



Screen shot of blog post

Publishing field notes as blog posts is a way of sharing ongoing work and also of keeping track of those notes. In the project, I used my previous experiences of using blog posts as a basis, although I did not create a separate project blog but used my old blog on my personal website<sup>431</sup> as well as a previously created blog for my work in Stockholm.<sup>432</sup> I started my first blog as a channel for informing potential audiences about irregularities in the schedule of my weekly performances with a juniper on Harakka Island in 2011.<sup>433</sup> The experience turned out to be fascinating, and I have written about the

431 See “blog in English,” “på svenska” and “suomeksi” to the left in *Performing Landscape* <https://annettearlander.com>

432 *Artistic Research in Stockholm* <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com>

433 *Katajan kanssa – With a Juniper (2011–2012)* <http://aa-katajankanssa.blogspot.com>

performativity of blogging using that first blog as an example.<sup>434</sup> After this successful attempt, I created a new blog for each of the remaining years of *Animal Years*.<sup>435</sup> These bilingual and trilingual blogs formed a kind of diary in which I wrote about my weekly performances immediately afterwards, but I also announced exhibitions and other events in advance. They serve as published field notes for the projects and proved quite practical, compared to the handwritten fieldnotes in notebooks I had used previously. By being public, at least in theory, and being gathered in one place online, they formed a fairly reliable archive. On the basis of these experiences, I created my personal webpage Performing Landscape and added blog posts in three languages, rather than start a new blog for each project. I documented the performances with trees in Helsinki and elsewhere on that blog.<sup>436</sup> And when performing with trees in Stockholm, I continued to use the blog I had created for my activities there.<sup>437</sup> I have thus continued the use of blog posts as field notes during Performing with Plants, even though I did not create a blog separately for that project. When beginning the project Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, my first action was to create a separate blog for the project,<sup>438</sup> because the idea of having an easily accessible public project website with all the material in one place, easily organized and easy to distribute, seemed important.

434 Arlander 2013a; Arlander 2015b.

435 Lohikäärmettä Kutsumassa – Att kalla på draken – Calling the Dragon (2012–2013) <http://aa-callingthedragon.blogspot.com> (2013–2014) and Käärmeen vuosi keinutellen – Ormens år i gungan – Year of the Snake Swinging <http://aa-yearofthesnake.blogspot.com>

436 Performing Landscape <https://annettearlander.com>

437 Artistic Research in Stockholm (2015–2019) <https://artistresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com>

438 Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees <https://meetingswithtrees.com>

Gathering basic facts about each recording session into a place where they are easily retrievable and meeting the challenge to write notes coherent enough to be published on a blog after each session has proved useful. The reflections I've included are not always very interesting, but some of the observations can be meaningful to look at afterwards, because the processes are long, and most things would easily be forgotten. During Performing with Plants, I usually linked the blog posts to visual documentation on the Research Catalogue, which served as the main archiving platform, since the blog posts did not form a separate whole in themselves.<sup>439</sup> I did not really expect readers or comments on the blog posts but considered them more like material for myself, the sole exception being the comments I solicited from Kirsi Heimonen on the blog posts where I describe our joint explorations in the bushes, an experiment loosely related to the project described in the collaboration section above.<sup>440</sup> I imagined I would use all these blog posts as material when writing about the project but have not actually used them as much as I planned or as extensively as I did, for example, in an article about the first and the last year in *Animal Years*, which is quite a good example of the use of blog posts as research data.<sup>441</sup> One exception is the voiceover in the video essay “Hanging in a Pine”, discussed previously, where I used some of the blog posts from my performances with the pine and another voiceover text, “Dearest Pine”,<sup>442</sup> published separately as well. The main use of the blog posts has been to support fact-check-

439 See, for example, documentation of the first year in Helsinki <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325189> and in Stockholm <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325188>

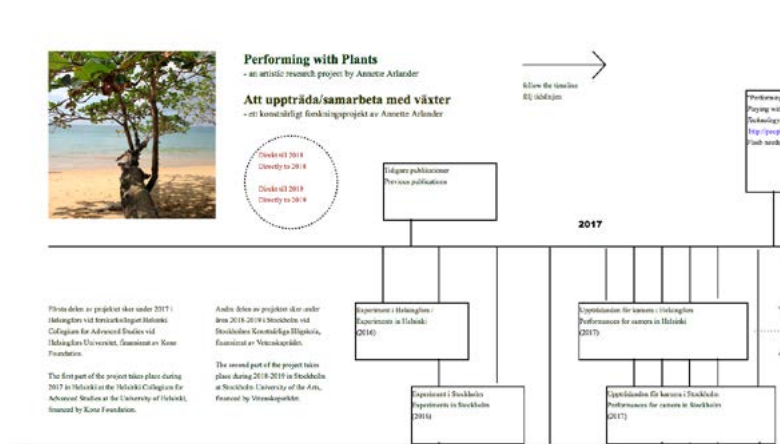
440 See, for example, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316682> And <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325194>

441 Arlander 2016.

442 Arlander 2020c.

ing, for example when something did happen. I soon became aware of the usefulness of writing down reflections related to texts that I had read, or exhibitions or films seen at the time, but I did not always follow up in my posts. Besides using blog posts as field notes, they could well be used for making research notes in a broader sense.

### *The RC as a living archive*



Screen shot of a web page

The main tool in terms of media that I have used in the projects *Performing with Plants* and *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, although perhaps not social media in the strict sense, is the Research Catalogue, an online platform for archiving, sharing and publishing artistic research as works or expositions. Unlike a blog, which functions in a linear mode, often with the last post on top, the RC is predominantly spatial: an exposition can be organized freely in almost any form, in the style of a timeline, mind map, or catalogue, with hyperlinked layers, and it can be kept private, made public or shared with select others. I have used the

platform from the very beginning and have been involved with the editorial board of two of the journals using the platform, *JAR (Journal for Artistic Research)* and *Ruukku – Studies in Artistic Research*. From the start, I have eagerly used the site to archive my video works as small files on my profile page<sup>443</sup> and have also created several expositions published in *Ruukku*.<sup>444</sup> The simple act of grouping certain works together is itself a helpful tool. Organizing the material and archiving some basic details of the works can of course be done without making them immediately available to the public, as I have done. Showing the accumulation of data, either as still images or small video files, is an important part of my research process. One could even call this ongoing exposition of the process my main method.

For the project *Performing with Plants*, I created a separate exposition to serve as the public project website and as a living archive to collect all the relevant material on one site. I designed it as a timeline running from left to right, beginning with a brief presentation and the project applications. It was important to have both parts of the project – the first part at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (funded by Kone Foundation) in 2017 and the second or main part at Stockholm University of the Arts (funded by Vetenskapsrådet) from 2018 to 2019 – on one site. I included links to pages with some previous works related to plants, such as the more or less ongoing project *Talking Trees*, and structured the page as the backbone of all the activities related to the project during the three coming years. To begin with, I thought that the material above the timeline would consist of public events and pub-

443 This format has recently been removed, so no new “works” can be added. All files are listed as media files only. The old ones do remain, though. See public profile <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/?person=4072>

444 Arlander 2013; 2014; 2017; 2020; 2021.

lications and the like, while all the material and the separate pages linked below the timeline would consist of works in progress and activities not yet public or published. This distinction soon proved hard to maintain, as I shared documentation of nearly all my activities and many of the public events, like seminars and conferences, were only semi-public in nature. The timeline soon looked rather chaotic, but I tried to keep at least the chronology in place. At the beginning of each year, I added links to pages, where the works of that year were to be organized on separate pages, as can be seen on the particular locations on the RC, at the beginning of 2017,<sup>445</sup> 2018<sup>446</sup> and 2019.<sup>447</sup> At the end of the timeline, which turned out to be quite extensive, in early 2020, I added the final report as a link to a separate page with a compilation of the main results.<sup>448</sup> Looking at the timeline now, it seems rather messy and is not very inviting to an outsider. As a tool for myself, the timeline has nevertheless been, and still is, quite useful.

For the pages documenting specific repeated performances, I combined several trees on one page according to the year. For example, the sycamore and the beech (or hornbeam) in Stockholm in 2017 are combined on one page<sup>449</sup> and the elms and alder stump in Helsinki in 2017 on another,<sup>450</sup> the pine trees and spruce stumps in

445 2017 beginning here <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551/1001/387>

446 2018 beginning here <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551/5805/374>

447 2019 beginning here <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551/13439/374>

448 2020 with the results here <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551/27805/198>

449 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2017, video stills <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325188>

450 Documentation of performances for camera in Helsinki 2017, video stills <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325189>

Stockholm in 2018 on one page<sup>451</sup> and the Tatarian maple in Stockholm 2019 on its own page.<sup>452</sup> The benefit of these separate pages is that they can be referred to and linked to directly, for instance in an article, without having to deal with the whole project and all the materials involved.<sup>453</sup> This logic of combining materials from one year on one page was extended to what I call “other experiments”, that is, performances with singular trees during my travels.<sup>454</sup> Many of these would certainly be lost and forgotten if not gathered on the Research Catalogue.

Learning from this experience, however, I structured the project website for the following project, Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, in a slightly different manner;<sup>455</sup> still moving from left to right in a timeline of sorts but visually, according to individual trees. The format of the individual pages is almost the same as the one I used for the trees in *Performing with Plants*, although I was now creating a new page for most trees. A brief, one-time performance with a tree has its own image and its own page in a similar manner as trees I visited for months. Compare, for example, the

451 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2018, video stills <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410491>

452 Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm 2019 (–2020), video stills <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550275>

453 One such example is “Behind the Back of Linnaeus” (Arlander 2020) <https://doi.org/10.22501/ruu.470496>

454 Other experiments with trees 2017 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/354391>

Other experiments with plants 2018 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410497>

Other experiments with plants 2019 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/550280>

455 Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/761327>

page for the Pine on the Shore on Harakka Island<sup>456</sup> with the Rowan on Harakka Island.<sup>457</sup> The idea is to present each tree with an image and with a link to a separate page documenting my meetings with that tree, and then list any events or publications below that row of images. The order of the trees is chronological; a new tree is added to the end of the row on the right.

Some groups of trees stand out as exceptions to this logic, for example Arts Research Africa – trees<sup>458</sup> and trees in Nirox,<sup>459</sup> following the logic of the site (Johannesburg and its environs). Originally, I thought I would focus on singular trees and visit them repeatedly, even if not regularly, and therefore structure the site based on the trees – and I did that at first. The trees I visited during my ARA residency and my visit to Nirox were mainly one-off meetings, and therefore I did not create new pages for each of them but grouped them together. If there were many once-only performances with trees, such as with the rowan on Harakka Island, I might reconsider my strategy and combine them as well. The main point, however, is the shift from a spatiotemporal focus, such as Helsinki in 2017 or Stockholm in 2019, to a focus on the trees, my co-performers. The site nevertheless comes into picture as a tool to distinguish, for example, the Pine on Hundudden<sup>460</sup> (in Stockholm) from the Pine in Brunnspar-

456 The Pine on the Shore on Harakka Island <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410>

457 The Rowan on Harakka Island <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/969333/0/0>

458 Arts Research Africa – Trees <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/800342>

459 Trees in Nirox <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/822442>

460 The Pine on Hundudden <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/771644>

ken<sup>461</sup> or the Pine on the Shore of Harakka Island<sup>462</sup> (both in Helsinki). And the spatiotemporal aspect becomes important again as the organizing tool when trees are grouped on one page, according to residencies as, for example, on pages such as More Trees in Mustarinda<sup>463</sup> and More Pines on Örö<sup>464</sup> and later Hailuoto,<sup>465</sup> Kilpisjärvi<sup>466</sup> and Eckerö.<sup>467</sup> Unlike during *Performing with Plants*, I did not write separate blog posts as field notes from each session (or each week), but rather I provided text next to the image on the Research Catalogue, especially in cases in which I wrote a letter to and with the tree on site (as discussed above). The shift from years to trees as the main organizing principle is nevertheless relevant and has consequences for future use of the archive. It reflects the shift of focus in my way of approaching trees and is a good example of the importance of deciding the structuring principles for the archive when sharing one's process via a living or continually changing archive or when using such archiving as a research method.

461 The Pine in Brunnsparken <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544>

462 The Pine on the Shore on Harakka Island <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410>

463 More Trees in Mustarinda <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/982302>

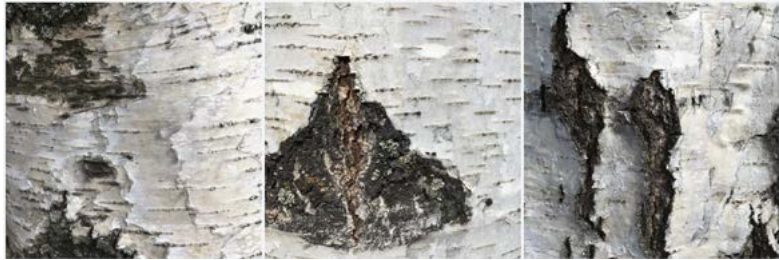
464 More Pines on Örö <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1036306>

465 See *Practicing with a Pine* in Hailuoto <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1219495>, *Trees* in Hailuoto <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1223364>, and *The Tarri Pine* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1225961>

466 See *Ars BioArctica* materials <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1289070>, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1292734> and <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1294375>

467 See pages from *Eckerö* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1305636> and <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1307712>

### *Visual diaries and photo collections*



Bark of birch (2018) photos on Flickr

At the beginning of the project, I wanted to create a visual diary with a focus on plants and to host it on a separate platform, not on my website; I was looking for something easy and quick. Not really familiar with social media, I nevertheless knew about Tumblr via the Harakka Island community and decided to give it a try. Essentially, it was just another blog platform, so why not. The Tumblr blog with daily images of plants was linked to the project archive, although I considered it more of a diary, rather than a performance or public blog. When trying to describe the diary at a working group meeting,<sup>468</sup> my colleagues had trouble understanding in what way these images had anything to do with performing. Perhaps the main purpose of these daily images was, at least when considered in retrospect, to help focus attention on the omnipresence of plants in various forms, even in urban environments.

The first year (2017), the diary was called Year One With Plants,<sup>469</sup> with one image of a plant of some kind every day. The first post has

468 This was at the meeting of the Artistic research Working group of PSi (Performance Studies international) during the conference PSi#23 Overflow (Performance Studies international Annual Conference) in Hamburg June 8–11.2017.

469 Year One With Plants <https://yearonewithplants.tumblr.com>

an image later used as an emblem for the project and the text: “My favorit [sic] Christmas Tree on the beach at Thai Mueang 29.12.2016.” In the beginning, I wrote small reflections or descriptions for the images, such as the following: “This young palm tree outside my window has a lamp attached to it and shines brightly all through the night – I wonder if it is disturbed by it, but I suppose it does not sleep the way animals do...” Sometimes two images were added, such as the images of my houseplant before and after watering, but rarely the date, which would have been useful. The last post bears the text “Small (wild) white flowers on the shore to end year one with plants,” presumably posted on a Christmas holiday trip. During the first year, the images spanned a wide variety, from trees to potted plants to floral decorations on textiles, and provide quite a fascinating sample of the presence of plants in the environment. This was the year I created *Helsinki Tree Calendar*, and all the candidates for those trees were included in the diary, which also reflects my travels during the year.

The second year (2018), I created a new blog called Year Two With Plants,<sup>470</sup> continuing in the same manner: beginning and ending on holiday trips. This year, with my base in Stockholm, the idea of plants was expanded to include everything from tomatoes to wooden tables. The first image was captioned “A strange succulent in the hotel garden in Fuerteventura, to begin this year two with plants,” and the year ended with “A palm tree in Puerto Calero, the last image of year two with plants.”

The third year (2019), I concentrated on trees in a third blog, Year Three With Plants.<sup>471</sup> The short texts usually indicate the species or type of tree and its location. The first image is nevertheless

470 Year Two With Plants <https://yeartwewithplants.tumblr.com>

471 Year Three With Plants <https://yearthreewithplants.tumblr.com>



a detail from a group of euphorbia with the text “A flourishing new year 2019 – with plants!” and the trees begin with “A palm tree in Puerto del Carmen,” continuing with images focusing on the crowns of trees photographed from below, mostly in silhouette and sometimes even at night. “A beech in Humlegården, the last image of year three with plants,” ends the year. This third series seemed more relevant and meaningful while making it, because of the focus on trees and the restrictions, which created some consistency and made the variations visible. When looking at the images now, the strange and completely idiosyncratic choices of the first two years are actually more fascinating in their quirkiness and reveal more about the way plants are part of our lives.

When *Performing with Plants* was finished at the end of 2019, I did not stop my tree diary but created a fourth Tumblr blog called *Meetings with Remarkable or Unremarkable Trees or Meetings with Trees*,<sup>472</sup> which I continued with in 2020 and 2021. Here the focus was first on the leaves of trees, then on fruits or seeds and later on buds. Focusing on leaves is of course challenging in winter months, but there are plenty of conifers. The series began with “Spruce branches as Christmas decoration around a shop window on Tehtaankatu” and ended with “Rowan in Myyrmäki center”. Unfortunately, Tumblr does not add the date to the images automatically, and in hindsight it would have been useful to add that manually with the location. The diary easily becomes an almost meaningless routine, a sort of duty among others. The accumulated collection of images nevertheless forms a diary that can be used as data. What to do with the data and how to develop this practice into something more useful and meaningful remains a task for the future.

472 *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* <https://meetingswithtrees.tumblr.com>

Using Flickr as a platform for another kind of visual diary, I took a series of photos as a daily practice, beginning with tree bark. The bark of the fir trees in Victoria, Australia, in July 2016, were probably the first videos of bark I recorded, before the project began. I recorded the bark of pine trees in Nida as well, in September 2017, without doing anything more with the images. Photographing the bark of a tree seemed like the perfect contrast and complement to images of the tree as a whole, a close-up and detail that would give another perspective of the life of a tree. To record the bark of trees as a daily practice and upload the images to a special account on the Flickr platform, I began on 27 July 2018 and continued with it systematically from August 2018 onwards. Soon, the practice settled into taking four square images of the bark of a tree from four directions, sometimes six or eight, named with the species and the place like “birch on Harakka Island”, the date being added automatically. All through 2018 and 2019, I continued with this practice, recording the bark of a tree every day. Sometimes, there were interesting lichen growing on the bark, and from the beginning of 2020 onwards I decided to record the lichen rather than the bark and abandoned the idea of moving around the trunk. The images in 2020 were thus focused on lichen growing on a specific tree, beginning with “Lichen on a maple tree in a yard on Tehtaankatu.” During the year, the number of daily images of one tree could grow to twelve or sixteen, although eight was the usual amount.

In addition to these still images of first bark and then lichen on bark, I recorded daily video clips of bark with my phone camera during some months in 2019, which I then uploaded to a page on the RC with the aim of creating a moving pattern, a moving field of variations of the surface of trees, as an experiment of sorts.<sup>473</sup> I

473 Bark videos <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/574690>

abandoned this practice after a while, because a grid created with them on the RC did not really work. The lichen diary I continued with until the end of the year, and I tried to combine it with the tree diary on Tumblr in such a manner that the images of lichen and the images of leaves came from the same tree. As with the daily Tumblr images, this diaristic practice of recording lichen soon turned into routine, rather than a reminder to focus on trees and their diversity.<sup>474</sup> In 2021, I changed my focus to wooden surfaces, details of things made of wood that could be photographed in close-up, as a series of almost similar images with small variations, showing the variety of wood as material. Beginning with the wooden floor of my home in Helsinki, I soon settled into a pattern of eight images of the same surface every day. Paradoxically, these images on Flickr, forming groups of decorative square surfaces, serve better as a diary than the Tumblr diaries, simply because the platform highlights the date of the photograph was taken or the date the image was uploaded.

474 Later, I returned to this material and compiled an essay based on the images of lichen (Arlander 2022a).

### *Performing pinecones and portraits of trees*



The pinecone (2020) photos on Instagram

Before these daily practices designed for Tumblr and Flickr, I had some previous experience with Instagram, a platform I adopted for the project. Overwhelmed by the constant flow of images on social media, without any logic whatsoever, I wanted to experiment with some kind of focus, to use a social media feed to create a work or story or ongoing performance of sorts and to somehow adapt to the scale of an image on a phone. A small red arrow painted on a pebble was the main character in a series of images in which the arrow always pointed at water in some manner. The first post, dated 22 July 2015, reads “May I introduce: The Arrow, a pebble with a painted arrow, which will perform instead of me. Usually, I perform landscape by posing looking at the view. By letting the Arrow do the job for me a new scale is possible...” The last performance by the arrow was on a beach (probably in Fuerteventura) on 31 December 2017, with the text “The ocean, the end.”

A new protagonist, a small dry grenadine brought home as a souvenir from the island of Brac in Croatia a few years earlier and now painted with a golden star to mark it as special, was introduced on 19 January 2018. The small seed ball, “Fröbollen”, was placed in snow with the question “A place to grow?” Another image in snow two days later, on 21 January, continued the theme: “Or, perhaps here?” In the third image, the seed ball is placed in a pot with plas-

tic plants with the text “Not really a place to grow...” This theme of finding a place was only a starting point, however; later, the seed ball would pose in all kinds of places every now and then. I carried the seed ball in a small purse in my handbag and took it out when I came to think of it. A dramatic change occurred in May 2019 when I received a tiny sculpture of an owl as a present from a colleague and introduced it in the same feed: “Feeling gigantic... with my new friend”. The seed ball and the owl were then performing together until their last appearance on 31 December 2019: “Thank you for this year, time to retire to the drawer.” The seed ball was part of *Performing with Plants* in 2018 and 2019, and the Instagram feed was linked to the project archive on the RC as well with the rubric “Photos: a small fruit or a big berry” in 2018.<sup>475</sup>

To begin 2020, as a continuation of the previous practice I introduced a new performer, a small pinecone, to accompany meetings with trees with a simple greeting: “Happy 2020 to everybody!” The pinecone continued to appear here and there during the year. At the beginning of 2021, a new character, an acorn (from the old oak on Galway Road in Johannesburg) appeared and performed a few times every now and then (sixteen times in all) before it was abandoned in snow on Örö on 24 February. After a pause, a new pinecone was introduced on 18 March 2021 and still makes occasional appearances. In contrast to the diaristic daily images on Tumblr and Flickr, these Instagram posts were and are more sporadic reactions to moments of inspiration or opportunity for a picture, conceived more like performances, with the same object appearing as a character in various circumstances.

Besides these experiments with scale, a smaller-than-human perspective, another Instagram account, *meetings\_with\_trees* was

475 See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551/5835/797>

linked to the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*. It consists of small video clips of trees based on a few simple rules, such as a vertical image format, beginning from the base of the tree and following its trunk up to the crown. These video clips thus literally record encounters with trees and also depict the trees in their full majesty, as it were. Using a separate account for these video clips in the same manner as the separate project blog emphasizes their connection to the project, rather than to a private or social activity (which is what the sharing of images on social media tends to be).

The need to create a new account for this new type of posts illustrates well my approach to social media in general, because each platform is used for a specific project. For sharing information about events or blog posts I’ve published, I use Twitter, and I share information or more personal content on Facebook; those platforms are “normal” social media for me, not linked to specific, restricted projects like the accounts on Tumblr, Flickr and Instagram, described above. Limiting the use of a platform to one type of imagery is one way of creating consistency and attracting attention and of using repetition and accumulation as creative tools – in this context as well.

Using social media for specific performances is a possibility many performance artists are increasingly exploring as a result of the restrictions related to the pandemic, and much remains to be done in this domain. For people attuned to performance in terms of an ephemeral event or in terms of the response of an audience, social media provides the possibility to focus on those dimensions. In my practice, the archival aspect is more important. Rather than the instant response, the satisfaction from the evidence that somebody actually looks at your work (which is important and nice too), my main focus has been on recording, documenting and journaling, and thus archiving my activities. The tendency to gather too much mate-

rial, create too many alternatives and store them all without knowing what to do with them can be held in check by selecting an image to post and discarding the others (or most of them). Because the various small projects for distinct platforms have their own themes and forms and aesthetic principles to follow, they also limit the choices available. And because they have the character of an ongoing activity – some of them being daily (like the Tumblr and Flickr images) and others occurring only occasionally but nevertheless repeatedly (like both Instagram projects) – the need to produce something makes it easier to be less demanding or critical. Perhaps most importantly, the results of such small acts of repeated recording generates a substantial amount of work almost as a side-effect of life. Not all of it is visually interesting, of technically high quality or meaningful in any deeper sense but nevertheless is valuable by accumulating alternatives, producing repetition with variation and demonstrating the process of research, exploring, playing and thinking.



*In Dalseong Park (2018) video still*

### III

## Thinking with Trees

What do I mean by thinking with trees? Because the phrase figures in the title of the whole text, I feel the need to explain myself. By thinking with trees, I am on the one hand referring to the work by Michael Marder, whose book *Plant Thinking* – which I encountered in 2015 – pointed me towards the journey I am on at the moment. On the other hand, I am referring to the problem of finding adequate words for what actually takes place and can take place between plants and people, or more specifically trees and myself. Should we speak of communication or trans-corporeal exchanges or a shared participation in *zoe* or what? I also must admit that when planning this book, I imagined a much larger part of it to consist of philosophical reflections, discussions based on findings in critical plant studies and a presentation of some of those ideas to readers interested in visual arts and artistic research. The field has expanded to such an extent that I no longer feel confident in being able to contribute to the discussion with anything other than my own experiences of practice. The title of this section was first “Problems of Performing with Plants” to parallel the previous part, which would have been “Strategies for Performing with Plants”. The decision to focus on trees instead of plants was fairly easy, considering the material. The change of the title of the second part was more important, because the idea to concentrate on aspects of thinking rather than problems

of performing is significant. In the following, I nevertheless include some of the problems I have encountered, especially the ethical challenges involved, well aware that I am only scratching the surface of this fascinating topic and that this remains on the level of a personal account or an explicitly situated knowing.

### Situated knowledge



*Lichen at Allinge 1-2* (2016) video still

The notions of site and situation have been discussed extensively in contemporary art, for instance by Miwon Kwon (2002), whose genealogy of the changes in the understanding of site-specificity is still valid in many ways, and by Nick Kay (2002), Lucy Lippard (1997) and others. Many variations of the term have since been proposed, such as site-oriented, site-responsive and the like. My purpose is not to repeat these discussions in relation to plants, although plants could be considered the true experts on site-specificity, and I will return to that later. Rather, I will first look at the notion “situated knowledge”, developed by feminist theorists such as Donna J. Haraway, and consider how that could be relevant to artistic research when working with plants and trees.

Revisiting Donna Haraway’s text “Situated Knowledges” from 1988,<sup>476</sup> I focus particularly on her claim that the object of knowl-

<sup>476</sup> I was prompted by the call of the organizers of the 7th Annual Conference on New

edge should be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen, a ground or a resource.<sup>477</sup> One could try to develop this idea further and propose that Haraway’s notion of “material-semiotic actor”, the object of knowledge as a meaning-generating part of the apparatus of bodily production,<sup>478</sup> and her emphasis on situated knowledges could be useful not only in the context of artistic research, as it is usually understood, but especially when dealing with sessile beings like plants. As Haraway pointed out, and many others have since emphasized, “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*.”<sup>479</sup> With the help of Haraway, I will thus approach the notions of site and situation, with their strong legacy within contemporary art, from a slightly different angle, through a situated practice of artistic research.

“Feminist objectivity makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world. We just live here and try to strike up noninnocent conversations by means of our prosthetic devices, including our visualization technologies.”<sup>480</sup>

The above sentence from 1988 describes very well the aim of my work when trying to perform for a tripod-mounted video camera with some trees or shrubs in various locations. Haraway’s text is still surprisingly relevant, and after struggling with Karen Barad’s (2007) rather sophisticated arguments related to the notion of

Materialisms Performing Situated Knowledges: Space, Time, Vulnerability in Warsaw 21–23.9.2016.

<sup>477</sup> Haraway 1988, 592.

<sup>478</sup> Haraway 1988, 595.

<sup>479</sup> Haraway 1988, 581.

<sup>480</sup> Haraway 1988, 594.

material-discursive practices, Haraway's writing seems light and witty. She proposes "an argument for situated and embodied knowledges", which is also "an argument against various forms of unlocatable and so irresponsible, knowledge claims", which cannot "be called into account".<sup>481</sup> Here I am not going to discuss the importance of her ideas to rebalance philosophical discussions related to speculative realism or object-oriented ontology and the attempts to move beyond an anthropocentric perspective in a manner that disregards the inevitable situatedness of all knowledge.<sup>482</sup> It is nevertheless useful to repeat some of Haraway's starting points. For her, "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment" rather than "about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility". According to her, "only partial perspective promises objective vision".<sup>483</sup> She explicitly writes:

"Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see."<sup>484</sup>

Haraway's now historical claim is a helpful reminder for everybody engaged in artistic research, because an artist is necessarily involved in the creation of her work on some level. This is not a drawback in terms of lack of objectivity but a reminder to explicate one's location, situation and perspective, which might actually be easier to neglect in other types of research. That said, critical self-reflection is needed when writing as an artist researcher so as to avoid any sense of self-promotion; the art historical approach,

481 Haraway 1988, 583.

482 For a critical discussion, see Alaimo 2010 and Alaimo 2014.

483 Haraway 1988, 582.

484 Haraway 1988, 582–3.

which is often expected by scholars in the field, is not necessarily the only tool for striking a balance between practical findings and their broader context. For me, for example, a theoretical contextualization seems easier.

By looking at aspects of performing with plants or trees and the practice or mode of production used in creating video works with them, the situatedness of artistic practice comes to the fore. As mentioned in the previous section, visiting specific trees repeatedly in the place where they grow, often for a whole year, and spending time with a tree or shrub encountered on a tourist trip only once provides two contrasting relationships to site. The question of transposing methods used in one location and situation into another – for instance, from a familiar site to an unfamiliar one – is thereby actualized as well.

Most of the videos mentioned above are "old school" in the sense that they are unprocessed documentary images, despite being digital. Such images are, of course, never unmediated, although by letting the automatic functions of the camera react to changes in the environment and by editing the works without post-production manipulation, authorial interventions are minimized. As Haraway observed long ago, the prosthetic "'eyes' made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of a passive vision" and demonstrate the fact that "all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life".<sup>485</sup>

The automatic functions of the camera are constructed in accordance with cultural-historical ideas of what constitutes a good image and so are my choices in framing the view. Referring to the ubiquitous profusion of images around us, Haraway suggests that

485 Haraway 1988, 583.

all our “pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference” as well as “the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view, even when the other is our own machine”.<sup>486</sup>

Obviously, my videos do not try to look at the world from the perspective of the shrubs. The camera is usually mounted on a tripod, resembling the perspective of a standing or sitting human being.<sup>487</sup> The same technique is employed in works created repeatedly at home and during short visits elsewhere: performing for a video camera on a tripod by entering the image to show a human figure looking at the view, thus in turn splitting into a videographer and a performer, and often editing the video by cutting out the entering and exiting.

I first explored Haraway’s ideas related to some performances with lichen made on a tourist trip in 2016 before beginning the project with plants. Some of the same issues are nevertheless relevant to that project, and these thoughts can therefore serve to exemplify the relationship to site in performing with trees as well. After working with “performing landscape” on Harakka Island on the northern coast of the Baltic Sea for more than twelve years, which was site-specific “by default”, a brief visit to the island of Bornholm during an Easter holiday in 2016 seemed the very opposite of situated practice. Although the work I made there was created spontaneously during an extended weekend, the relationship to the site was nevertheless highly relevant. Due to the shortness of time available, my response to the site was necessary superficial, focus-

486 Haraway 1988, 583.

487 An exception are the “pineview” videos created in Nida with a GoPro camera while sitting in a tree, from the perspective of the tree. See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=393160>

ing on the most immediate visual elements. But this urgency also helped in choosing the obvious. Because I could not use my customary technique of repeating the same image over longer periods of time, I had to consider which elements of my practice I could use in this new situation, how to transform my method according to the circumstances.

Due to the contingencies of the situation – I had to make do with what was available in terms of time, dress and so on – the work turned into much more of a conversation with the site than would have happened if I’d had more time to plan. Thus, I came in as a tourist, looked around, was impressed by the yellow cliffs colored by the lichen and decided to do something with them; I did that and left without getting to know hardly anything, neither the human community in the area, nor the community of lichen, for that matter.<sup>488</sup> I encountered similar situations on many of my travels within the project and had to make the best of it.

The works created in this way are not site-specific in any of the different meanings analyzed by Miwon Kwon, for example – they do not focus on sharing an embodied presence with the viewer, nor discuss the institutional sites of production and consumption framing the work, nor create a discursive site through the topics dealt with in the work.<sup>489</sup> Nevertheless, the videos are the result of a situated practice in the sense that the impulse for doing them came from the place they were inspired by and they respond to some characteristics of the site. Moreover, they were formed in reaction to the situation, including the limitations in terms of time. And the same is true for most of the one-session performances with particular trees.

488 For a detailed description of the work, see Arlander 2018e.

489 Kwon 2002, 30.



Opposing these two approaches to site – on the one hand, working in a familiar environment, committing to a community or a specific tree, for instance, and on the other hand, responding and reacting to an unfamiliar site, grabbing the available contact points as a visitor – is probably not fruitful. It is easy to criticize the visitor's gaze as the opposite of situated knowledge, but the visitor's position can also be a useful tool. Only when a place is still unfamiliar and strange can one see details that later would be overlooked when it becomes habitual and customary.

Haraway's notion of "material-semiotic actor", the object of knowledge as a meaning-generating part of the apparatus of bodily production,<sup>490</sup> could be useful in terms of many kinds of artistic research. In the case with the lichen (which were not fully foregrounded, despite being the real reason for the work), the specific evening light and the restricted timespan available for recording were the main factors, or material-semiotic actors, informing and forming the work. Other entangled actors, such as the camera, tripod, legacy of Western romantic painting, my own previous experiences with performing landscape, the weird woolen cap I happened to be wearing, and so on, contributed to the work. In other cases, other specificities of the situation – especially the characteristics of the trees I performed with, their surroundings and other contingencies – would create another kind of meaning-generating part of the apparatus. Was it possible to climb into the tree? Was there enough space to place the camera at a suitable distance? What kind of scarf did I have with me?

Besides thinking of the various material-semiotic actors and their entanglements, the question of scale is interesting in this specific case. Concerning the images of the lichen, I regretted not cre-

490 Haraway 1988, 595.

ating more close-ups with them and realized I had followed a very human scale. But that presumes an idea of the lichen as minuscule. If colonies of lichen are thought of as larger entities, they do not even fit within the image frame – as Karen Barad exclaims in an interview, referring to studies with colonies of slime mold: "How can we expect the notion of an organism understood as an individual that is situated in a container we call the environment" to be able to describe "the complexity of the intra-active reconfiguring of bodily boundaries that defines the slime mold's astonishing material existence?"<sup>491</sup>

When choosing to work with the lichen, the choice to focus on the color was the main artistic idea; this in turn was based on aesthetic ideas related to the experience of color, on my initial response to the site and the kind of actions it affords, on historical ideas related to the tradition of landscape imagery and on the context of my previous works. The same goes for many of the quick sketches created with various trees. The aesthetic choices easily dominate: is there a place for the human performer; can the tree be framed in a beautiful way? One could challenge many of these works by saying that they rest too much on aesthetic ideas, a rather dated interpretation of beauty and a romantic idea of landscape. One could even claim that they lack an artistic idea in a strict sense. What is the conceptual challenge or paradox being presented? What is the critical or ethical point to be made? What is the taboo or ambiguity being played with? And so on. In contemporary art, some form of criticality is expected in order to motivate aesthetic concerns even outside of a research context. These works could, however, be related to exploring the possibility of "performing with" or "becoming with" other creatures, such as plants – an issue that is increasingly relevant today.

491 Barad 2012, 77.

A more recent and much quoted text by Haraway, in which she emphasizes the relationality of creation and production using the term sympoiesis, can serve as an example of current discussions: “Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means ‘making with’. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or selforganizing.”<sup>492</sup> For her, “the radical implication of sympoiesis” is that “earthlings are *never alone*”.<sup>493</sup> She links sympoiesis to “complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems” and understands it as “a word for worlding-with, in company”.<sup>494</sup> Moreover, sympoiesis “generatively unfurls and extends autopoiesis”.<sup>495</sup> Haraway reminds us of the importance of “becoming-with” and writes:

“Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all.”<sup>496</sup>

The others Haraway refers to here are not only humans. Importantly, regarding situated knowledges, she further stresses, in concordance with her text from 1988, how “material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplac, entangled and worldly”.<sup>497</sup>

As an idea, performing with lichen is in many ways suitable as an example for “becoming with”, although I was not aware of the notion at the time of making the work. Lichen themselves are products of a sympoiesis of sorts: all lichen are composite organisms that consist of algae or cyanobacteria living in a symbiotic relationship

492 Haraway 2016, 58.

493 Ibid.

494 Ibid.

495 Ibid.

496 Haraway 2016, 4.

497 Ibid.

with the filaments of fungi, and they have properties that differ from their component organisms. Although lichen can seem plantlike, they are not plants.<sup>498</sup> Lichen include some of the toughest lifeforms on the planet and can survive in the harshest of circumstances. As a counterpoint to trees in terms of size, they are good reminders of the vast variety of lifeforms we call plants. Trees too, engage in symbiotic relationships with fungi, bacteria and other micro-organisms in so-called mycorrhiza, a symbiotic relationship between photosynthesizing plants and fungi, based on the exchange of sugars and minerals. Plants are engaged in sympoiesis, in becoming-with other lifeforms – besides being experts in site-specificity and situated knowledge of the places where they grow, displaying their knowledge of the site in their very being. As sessile beings, plants are extremely sensitive to their surroundings; they can integrate themselves into their environment to such an extent that they reflect in their form and growth their relationship to that specific environment.<sup>499</sup> The plant and its environment form a dynamic unity; we can see the environment in the characteristics of a plant, because the plant responds to the conditions it grows in.<sup>500</sup>

498 My knowledge of lichen is rudimentary, based on internet sources such as Wikipedia.

499 Holdrege 2013, 105.

500 Holdrege 2013, 111.

## Producers of space



*Resting with a Pine 1* (2017) video still

Michael Marder has analyzed the relationship of plants to their environment from a philosophical perspective; the role of plants is crucial in creating a landscape, since “the plant makes the land and the sky what they are both in themselves and in their articulation with each other”.<sup>501</sup> According to Marder, we need to analyze human interaction with lived space and compare it with how plants engage with the places they inhabit.<sup>502</sup> To humans, plants seem immobile and forced to stay in the same place because their movement takes place on another timescale and is related to growth. Importantly, plants do not seem obliged to separate themselves from their surroundings, to negate their connection to a place, in order to fully become themselves through this oppositional stance, like other types of subjectivity. On the contrary, a vegetal being must “remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows” and its relation to the

501 Marder 2013a, 66.

502 Marder 2015, 190.

elements is not domineering but receptive,<sup>503</sup> as when a flower or leaf turns its widest surfaces to the sun or the way the root imbibes everything, whether nutrients or poisonous substances, from the soil in which it burrows.<sup>504</sup>

Marder notes how plants do not “construct their subjectivity by separating from and opposing themselves from the rest of their milieu, in the manner of an animal or a human”.<sup>505</sup> Vegetal subjects “operate by way of exposure (for instance to solar radiation) instead of interiorization”.<sup>506</sup> For humans “who tend to conflate the psyche with the invisibility of ‘inner life’”, the vegetal existence “without depth and a subjectivity open to the world appears strange and incomprehensible”.<sup>507</sup> The tendency to valorize interiority and to assume separation from the environment is a result of the narrative of Western metaphysics, which structures “the emergence and demarcation of the private, inner, psychic space as the culmination of a long process of spiritualization, interiorization and cultivation of subjectivity”.<sup>508</sup> On a material level, human beings are as dependent on the chemistry of the soil and the air as trees are, although our ability to move creates the illusion that we can simply go somewhere else when they become polluted or diluted of nourishing components.

Plants do not only adapt but actually create their world and therefore also our world. In his extraordinary study *The Life of Plants – A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2017, in English 2019), Emanuele Coccia creates a philosophical study based on his knowledge of botany. In relationship to site, and in concordance with Marder, Coccia

503 Marder 2013a, 69.

504 Ibid.

505 Marder 2012, 20.

506 Ibid.

507 Ibid.

508 Marder 2012, 21.

observes how “[o]ne cannot separate the plant – neither physically nor metaphysically – from the world that accommodates it”.<sup>509</sup> In a manner that has implications for our way of understanding the environment, he stresses that “[p]lants, in their history and evolution, demonstrate that living beings produce the space in which they live rather than being forced to adapt to it” and “have modified the metaphysical structure of the world for good”.<sup>510</sup> Humans claim that they have transformed the planet, but actually plants, particularly algae, did it first and continue doing so. Plants have produced a “world of which they are both part and content”, and they “demonstrate that life is a rupture in the asymmetry between container and contained”.<sup>511</sup> Coccia explains, “[w]hen there is life, the container is located in the contained (and is thus contained by it); and vice versa.”<sup>512</sup> This paradoxical statement makes sense through the example of breathing: while breathing, we are “immersed in a medium that penetrates us with the same intensity as we penetrate it”.<sup>513</sup>

Coccia’s description of mutual containment seems relevant to both my practice of performing for the camera with trees and for the resulting video works when he writes how “the relation between the container and the contained is constantly reversible”, how “what is place becomes content, what is content becomes place” and how “medium becomes subject and the subject becomes medium”.<sup>514</sup> According to Coccia “climate presupposes this constant topological inversion, this oscillation that undoes the border between subject

509 Coccia 2019, 5.

510 Coccia 2019, 10.

511 Ibid.

512 Ibid.

513 Coccia 2019, 11.

514 Coccia 2019, 27.

and environment”.<sup>515</sup> Despite efforts to maintain ourselves as separate entities, there is no clear demarcation line between our bodies and the rest of the world. For Coccia, “[t]o breathe means to be plunged into a medium that penetrates us in the same way and with the same intensity as we penetrate it”.<sup>516</sup>

Immersion and mixture are key terms for Coccia, and to him the plant is “a paradigm of immersion”.<sup>517</sup> While mixture “defines the state of fluidity”, immersion is another term describing the relationship between the container and contained. Immersion “is first of all an action of mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium”.<sup>518</sup> This means that “[s]ubject and environment act on each other and define themselves starting from this reciprocal action”.<sup>519</sup> Or, in other words, “to penetrate the surrounding environment is to be penetrated by it”.<sup>520</sup> This insight leads him to assert that “in all space of immersion, to act and to be acted upon are formally indistinguishable”.<sup>521</sup> Coccia thus explains immersion as a “radical identity of being and doing” and uses as an example the experience of swimming, stating explicitly: “One cannot *exist* in a fluid space without modifying, by this very fact, the reality and form of the environment that surrounds us.”<sup>522</sup> This is supposedly true for the air as well, although it is perhaps less palpable, and for other elements, too; I cannot sit in a tree, or next to a tree, without affecting its reality and vice versa.

515 Coccia 2019, 27.

516 Coccia 2019, 53.

517 Ibid.

518 Coccia 2019, 37.

519 Ibid.

520 Ibid.

521 Ibid.

522 Coccia 2019, 37–38.

Despite his emphasis on fluidity, Coccia seems to assume pre-existing entities that mix but somehow remain fixed; for him “universal circulation is fluid, the place where everything comes into contact with everything else and comes to mix with it without losing its form and its own substance”.<sup>523</sup> He understands the photosynthesis of plants as “a cosmic process of fluidification of the universe, one of the movements through which the fluid of the world constitutes itself: what allows the world to breathe and keeps it in a state of dynamic tension”.<sup>524</sup> There is a constant and ongoing transformation of the environment, demonstrated by vegetation. “The existence of plants is, by itself, a global modification of the cosmic environment,” Coccia asserts, because “[t]o be’ means for them, to make world [faire monde]”.<sup>525</sup> This realization leads him to state that “*the existence of every living being is necessarily a cosmogonic act* and that a world is always, simultaneously a condition of possibility and a product of the life it hosts”.<sup>526</sup> In other words, “[e]very organism is the invention of a way of producing the world...”<sup>527</sup> Like humans, plants and animals create their own worlds and make them suitable for their own way of living.

Coccia rejects the idea of separate niches, however; according to him, there are no separate niches or life-worlds, because we are immersed in the worlds of others. “Being in the world means to exercise influence especially outside one’s own space, outside one’s own habitat, outside one’s own niche.”<sup>528</sup> According to him, “the totality of the world one lives in ... is and will always be infested by oth-

523 Coccia 2019, 27.

524 Coccia 2019, 37.

525 Coccia 2019, 38.

526 Ibid.

527 Ibid.

528 Coccia 2019, 43.

ers”.<sup>529</sup> Thus, “the world is by definition the life of others: the ensemble of other living beings”.<sup>530</sup> And, in this sense, my performances with trees have consequences for their environment and “impact”, whether I intend it or not. We perform with and for each other, whatever we do. I am performing with plants whether I know it or not and am perhaps even thinking with trees all the time.

“To recognize that the world is a space of immersion,” Coccia says, “means that there are no real or stable frontiers.”<sup>531</sup> We are not only breathing the same air; we are exchanging it all the time. “The air we breathe is not a purely geological or mineral reality [...] but rather the breath of other living beings. It is a byproduct of ‘the lives of others’”.<sup>532</sup> Here our dependence on vegetation becomes evident; as Coccia formulates it, “every day we feed off the gaseous excretions of plants. We could not live but off the life of others”.<sup>533</sup> According to him, immersion can be understood as a result of “the fact that life is always its own environment and that, because of this, it circulates from body to body, from subject to subject, from place to place”.<sup>534</sup> Although he does not emphasize it, his idea of immersion comes close to Haraway’s idea of sympoiesis.

Coccia stresses how immersion does not mean imagining one substrate. “The cosmos – that is, nature – is not the foundation of things, it is their mixture, their breathing, the movement that animates their interpenetration.”<sup>535</sup> And such “a relationship of radical and absolute interiority ... nullifies any distinction between container

529 Coccia 2019, 43.

530 Ibid.

531 Ibid.

532 Coccia 2019, 47.

533 Ibid.

534 Ibid.

535 Coccia 2019, 70.

and contained”.<sup>536</sup> The counterintuitive “fact of *being contained in something* coexists with the fact of containing this same thing”,<sup>537</sup> he writes. “The container is also the content of what it contains,” and this is a dynamic and topological rather than logical identity.<sup>538</sup> For Coccia, the life of plants is “the clearest proof that the world is mixture and that every being of the world ... is in the world with the same intensity with which the world is in it”.<sup>539</sup>

What is demonstrated by the life of plants can be extended to other forms of life. “Universal mixture embodies the fact that the world is constantly exposed to the transformation brought about by its components.”<sup>540</sup> All things are constantly transformed and transforming not only themselves but the world they live in. Coccia adds in passing that “[o]ne need not wait for the Anthropocene to encounter this paradox: it was the plants that, millions of years ago, transformed the world by producing the conditions of possibility of animal life”.<sup>541</sup> Although microbes probably should be credited for that, the basic idea of plants having transformed and still constantly transforming the world is clear. Coccia actually criticizes the use of the term Anthropocene, because it “transforms what defines the very existence of the world into a single action, historical and negative” as well as “makes nature a cultural exception and makes the human being an extranatural cause”.<sup>542</sup> Moreover, “[i]f every mind”, he writes, “makes the world, this is because each act of breath is not just the simple survival of the animal in us, but the form and

536 Coccia 2019, 70.

537 Ibid.

538 Ibid.

539 Coccia 2019, 71.

540 Ibid.

541 Ibid.

542 Coccia 2019, 72.

consistency of the world of which we are the pulse”.<sup>543</sup> Rejecting simplified notions like “environment” because “the living being is an environment for the world in the same way in which the remaining things of the world are the environment of the living individual”, he summarizes: “Influence always goes in both directions.”<sup>544</sup>

Notions like immersion, mixture and mutual implication of container and contained, as introduced by Coccia, have relevance to all kinds of artistic practices and research activities, although they seem especially pertinent to the practice of performing with plants and to engaging with vegetation in general. The idea that we create the conditions we are trying to adapt to is significant for the development of artistic research and good to remember when considering any kind of research culture.

The relationship between subject and “environment”, even the problem of thinking in those terms, has of course been theorized in many ways. Teresa Brennan has spoken of the indissolubility of the individual and the environment<sup>545</sup> and Stacy Alaimo has emphasized the trans-corporeal exchanges<sup>546</sup> constantly taking place between bodies, while Karan Barad has problematized the idea of speaking of a subject and surrounding environment to begin with, and suggests that *relata* do not pre-exist their relations.<sup>547</sup> Emphasizing the role of plants and their ways of producing the space we share, the world we live in, as well as the basic idea that all living beings produce the world they inhabit, is nevertheless useful when considering what thinking with trees might mean and how it would occur.

543 Coccia 2019, 72.

544 Ibid.

545 Brennan 2000, 187.

546 Alaimo 2010, 2.

547 Barad 2012, 77.

## Breathing with plants



*Day with a Firethorn Rhus* (2020) video still

Breathing, as emphasized by Coccia, is one of the basic biological processes that we share and can enjoy with plants. The idea of breathing as a shared practice among many lifeforms on the planet is something that can help us realize our interconnectedness. In their joint publication *Through Vegetal Being* (2016), Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder narrate, in separate but parallel texts resembling letters, their personal philosophical experiences with vegetation. Irigaray asks how we are to speak of the vegetal: “Is not one of its teachings to show without saying, or to say without words?”<sup>548</sup> She also explains her reason for including the word “through” rather than “with” vegetal in the title: “through” for her “means that we live thanks to vegetal being, which procures pure air for us; that vegetal being somehow corresponds to a stage of our becoming”, and adds, true to her insistence on the importance of sexual difference,

548 Irigaray in Irigaray and Marder 2016, 6.

“toward a world that takes into account our identity and subjectivity as they are, that is, as sexuated”.<sup>549</sup>

The connection between women and vegetation in philosophy is discussed by Elaine P. Miller in her book *The Vegetative Souls – From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (2002), in which she describes some key philosophers’ (including Irigaray’s) take on plants in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Michael Marder’s book *The Philosopher’s Plant* (2014). She presents Immanuel Kant’s views on vegetation via the English garden, Goethe’s with a focus on his appreciation of the metamorphosis of plants and Hölderlin’s through the gleaning. Empedokles and the tragic Christ are involved through a discussion of plant vulnerability, while Hegel is represented by the self-sacrifice of the innocent plant; Nietzsche’s take on the ivy and the wine ends the list. The concluding remarks – “Dissemination, Rhizomes and Efflorescence: The Legacy of the Vegetative Soul in Twentieth-Century Thought” – provide the most interesting part of the study for a reader with less interest in the history of philosophy. “Derrida’s notion of dissemination, Deleuze and Guattari’s articulation of the rhizome and Irigaray’s trope of efflorescence all explicitly perform” what Miller calls “a plant-like reading”.<sup>550</sup> A disseminative reading acknowledges the productivity of interpretation, and a rhizomatic reading refuses unique sources and stresses nonlinearity, while efflorescence subverts and transforms the tradition “with metamorphic ivy-like growth”.<sup>551</sup> Miller notes how all through her career, Irigaray has repeatedly returned to the metaphor of the plant, on the one hand “to criticize the negative way in which it has traditionally been used to characterize the ontological status of woman”

549 Irigaray in Irigaray and Marder 2016, 100.

550 Miller 2002, 183.

551 Ibid.

and on the other hand “to subvert the traditional metaphor in the productive notion of efflorescence”.<sup>552</sup> While Irigaray “proposes a feminine model of subjectivity” with “a close connection to the philosophy of nature” and “the figure of the plant”<sup>553</sup>, she does not suggest a “return to nature” but, rather, proposes “a reworking of the symbolics of nature ... from within the social or symbolic order ... to retroactively restructure the ways in which women’s embodiment, natural role and passage into subjectivity are thought”.<sup>554</sup> According to Miller, Irigaray’s manner of associating plantlike growth, the feminine and nature is fairly traditional but has “a different agenda”.<sup>555</sup> Irigaray focuses on “the redemptive possibilities inherent in the very metaphors that have been used to reduce the feminine to the silent, concealed ground of Being”.<sup>556</sup> And she is aware of “a grave danger in the way nature has been appropriated” in order “to harness and utilize it without recognizing the loss such a process involves”.<sup>557</sup> A “narrowly scientific and technological world view leaves no room for nature as excess”, she maintains – “an excess that guarantees the possibility of change in the depiction of sexual difference”.<sup>558</sup>

In a short text authored jointly by Irigaray and Marder, “Thinking Anew” (2015), which discusses the possibility of human rebirth, they criticize scientists and philosophers who conflate thinking and calculative reason and “concede that non-human living beings can also think” but make the mistake of assuming it to be computational, for example, “that plants, too, are capable of cognition by calculating

552 Miller 2002, 188.

553 Ibid.

554 Miller 2002, 189.

555 Miller 2002, 190.

556 Miller 2002, 191.

557 Miller 2002, 190.

558 Ibid.

differences in the time of daylight, so as to come up with decisions regarding the best time for blossoming”.<sup>559</sup> Regretting that human beings “have become ensnared in mechanical thought – which is nothing other than computation and, therefore, not a thought”, they suggest that we “try to recover a minimum of breathing and of natural energy in order not to remain totally dependent on the general economy holding us prisoners”.<sup>560</sup> For them, our situation is inverse from that posited by Socrates, who claimed in *Phaedrus* that “trees won’t teach me anything” since “computational thinking no longer has anything to teach us, while the life and the way of surviving of trees do”.<sup>561</sup> For instance, the open-ended growth of trees “reveals that plants are neither machines nor organisms, subordinated to the demands of the whole external to them or to a pre-existing plan”.<sup>562</sup> Because this could be a model for human growth as well, they suggest we turn to plants for help: “Asking for assistance from vegetal environment [...] to recover our breath [...] to perceive what being alive means” and, moreover, “to keep silent and to cultivate silence [...] as a place where we can [...] gather ourselves together anew”.<sup>563</sup>

Understanding that we are breathing the same air with all the living beings around us, the same oxygen or carbon dioxide and the same molecules of various poisons, might help us remember that we depend on plants. We need plants not only for our nutrition but for the air we breathe. Thus, whether we like it or not, we are performing with plants, acting with them, all the time. In a more specific manner, one way to consider performing with plants in the sense of an embodied practice shown to an audience could be, simply, breath-

559 Irigaray and Marder 2015, 27.

560 Irigaray and Marder 2015, 28.

561 Irigaray and Marder 2015, 29.

562 Ibid.

563 Irigaray and Marder 2015, 28.



ing with plants. And, perhaps more importantly – following Irigaray and Marder – such breathing could be developed into a healing and regenerating practice. Visiting specific plants in the place where they grow, returning to them repeatedly, becoming still with them for a moment, spending time together with them in silence, breathing with them, is a way to practice an awareness of breathing not only through but with plants.

### Growing beings



*With the Apple Tree* (2021) video still

Besides breathing beings, we are also growing beings. In his text “The Place of Plants: Spatiality, Movement, Growth” (2015), Marder notes how, to our senses, plants seem not to move, and he reminds us that locomotion or change of place is only one of four types of movement, according to Aristotle, “the other three being growth, decay and change of state or metamorphosis”.<sup>564</sup> For Marder, plants, animals and humans are all “growing beings”, although

<sup>564</sup> Marder 2015, 186.

“[t]he rhythms of growth, within and outside of us, diverge from those of human consciousness”.<sup>565</sup> Growth is thus something we share with plants. The “asynchrony between our attentive gaze and the movement of plants (as well as the physiology of our bodies)”, an “ontological time-lag [...] renders vegetal life so foreign to the vitality of animals and humans” and creates “the impression that plants are immobile”<sup>566</sup>, Marder writes. In my year-long time-lapse videos with deciduous trees – for example, the elms in Helsinki or the beech and Tatarian maple in Stockholm<sup>567</sup> – the growth, decay and change of the state of plants is rather palpable, because there is not much else in terms of visible movement besides the seasonal changes in the foliage and the environment. In some sense, the trees are not only involuntarily posing for the camera but actively performing their growth.

With regard to performance and growth, Marder writes: “If to perform is necessarily to bestow a form, then performing growth is tantamount to performing the un-performable.”<sup>568</sup> This impossibility is linked to our different relationship with movement and time, compared to plants and to the difficulty in directing or controlling our own growth. It is nevertheless possible to diminish the time-lag between human and plant movements, Marder notes: “Time-lapse photography can speed up the vegetal movement of growth” while “[t]he inverse process of our slowing down”, he adds, “will inevitably meet inflexible limits” because “we cannot slow down enough

<sup>565</sup> Marder 2015, 187.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> See *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1&2* (2018) 1 h. 41 min. 10 sec., <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476426> *With a Beech in Djurgården* (2018) 44 min. 10 sec., <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=438266> and *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple* (2020) 1 h. 48 min. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=783427>

<sup>568</sup> Marder 2015, 187.

to come anywhere close to the speed of vegetal growth”.<sup>569</sup> Performing growth as a human being, like documenting the growth of hair, can be a way to demonstrate the passing of time rather than performing growth.<sup>570</sup> The same is true of the rough time-lapse videos with trees, where some form of speeding up of time does occur, although not in the accustomed sense of showing the sprouting of a seed or the opening of a flower with the help of a speeded-up video. Rather, the videos compress the slow processes of seasonal changes into a visible timespan. There is, however, a slowing down as well, on the one hand due to the still-act of the human sitting in or on or next to a tree and doing it repeatedly, and on the other hand by this non-action thwarting the expectations of the viewer for something to happen and for something to be narrated or communicated besides this time passing, this slow “growth” that can be witnessed in the video.

Marder compares the absolute “here” of the plant with the difficulty for humans “to linger patiently in the ‘here’, without ... fantasizing about something that lies ‘over there’ where we are not”.<sup>571</sup> For humans, it takes effort to be still; to still the body can help still the mind and it is often practiced for that purpose in various forms of meditation. Some kind of slowing down of human time is possible, at least for the performer, when engaging in a stillness-practice such as sitting in a tree or balancing next to it.

Speeding up plant time is not a real solution to the problem of how to perform with plants. As Marder explains: “If ... the meaning of being is time, then denying the plant its own time amounts to robbing

569 Marder 2015, 187–88.

570 In his *One Year Performance 1980–1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, Tehching Hsieh punched a time clock and took a photo of himself every hour for a year, combining the photos into a six-minute film that shows his hair growing as evidence of time passing.

571 Marder 2015, 189.

it of its being”.<sup>572</sup> Trying to render the movements of plants visible to human senses means treating plants as resources for human enjoyment, not as inter-species collaborators or as performing, moving, growing beings in their own right. For him, the question is: “[h]ow can art follow the movement of growth with the least possible interference?”<sup>573</sup> One obvious way to perform with plants while respecting their time is to spend time with them, as, for example, people tending their gardens might do. Rather than set up a tent and live next to a tree or shrub, or even in a tree as some activists do,<sup>574</sup> I have chosen the easier path of visiting trees repeatedly. Before beginning the project, I experimented with that in the context of performing landscape. I have discussed, for instance, “holding hands” with a juniper and the possibilities and limitations of a semi-fictional mode of relating to plants in “Becoming Juniper – Performing Landscape as Artistic Research”,<sup>575</sup> emphasizing actual touching as a useful technique when trying to focus on the here and now.

Marder maintains that we can have “a rough idea of what the place of plants (which is also a place *for them*, interpreted *by them*) looks like”, but “we cannot put ourselves in this place, much less perform whatever happens in it”.<sup>576</sup> This is true in my experience as well, but perhaps we do not have to put ourselves in the place of plants to perform with them. And we do not necessarily have to perform what happens in that space. Perhaps we can perform together in a simpler manner. An actor’s impulse might be to transform oneself into a plant, to play at being a plant, to try to behave as if one were

572 Marder 2015, 188.

573 Ibid.

574 Philp 2018.

575 Arlander 2015, n.p.n. <https://nivel.teak.fi/becoming-juniper/>

[becoming-juniper-performing-landscape-as-artistic-research-annette-arlander/](https://nivel.teak.fi/becoming-juniper-performing-landscape-as-artistic-research-annette-arlander/)

576 Marder 2015, 191.

a plant or even try to become a plant, imagining oneself becoming a plant for a moment. This is not necessary, however, in order to perform with plants. We can simply share space and time with plants and record that sharing, irrespective of the impossibility of a truly shared understanding of that space.

When sitting with shrubs or trees, I do put myself in their place or rather next to them, and I also adopt the position of a sessile being, albeit for an instant, but I do not attempt to share the experience of the time and space of the plants. When posing for the camera with plants, I am nevertheless allowing them to express their mode of being, letting them perform in their own manner. I accept that I cannot know what the plants sense or feel, except on a very general level, which would be shared by most lifeforms. In any case, we are performing, or perhaps non-performing, in the same image space, much as we are living in the same city; we are appearing or occurring there together.

The idea of growth as movement is one possibility for seeing plants perform. Growth is visible only over time; it is the year-long time-lapses, rather than the shorter ones covering a day and a night, that show the growth of plants as movement, or if not growth directly, then flourishing and decay. The growth and subsequent withering of the leaves according to the seasons provide the main action, while the human being moves very little in comparison. It is nevertheless through the relative stillness of the human figure that the movement or growth of the tree can come to the fore. Adopting a momentary stillness is one way of beginning to explore performing with plants and sharing time and space with trees.

Marder proposes that we “attempt a certain performative approximation to the phenomenology of the plants themselves”.<sup>577</sup>

<sup>577</sup> Marder 2015, 191.

What exactly this could be is harder to imagine. He expects the arts to show how this could be done, because “attempting the impossible and imagining other worlds” is “the highest vocation of art” and, consequently, he poses “a challenge to those artists and performers who would dare at the very least to include the spatiality, movement, and perspective of the vegetal in their work”.<sup>578</sup> Although not a direct response, *Performing with Plants* certainly tried to respond to that call in some manner. Rather than trying to imagine what or how vegetal beings experience their surroundings, the project explored how we can experience and appreciate the support, strength and energy generously provided by plants. One way to do that is by becoming still with them for a moment. As Marder suggests, “[t]he inclusion of the vegetal does not imply a mere representation of plants”, and perhaps “we can tease out, aesthetically, the vegetal heritage in us, [...] the fleeting sense of our plant-hood”.<sup>579</sup> On an experiential level, this might require imagination, but on a visual or aesthetic level, stillness is a good starting point for becoming with plants or performing our plant-hood with them. On a deeper level, however, the question of thinking with plants remains unresolved, something to be explored: How does one engage with the vegetal, how does one ponder with plants, and how does one even begin thinking with trees?

<sup>578</sup> Marder 2015, 191–92.

<sup>579</sup> Marder 2015, 192.

## Plants performing



*With a Weeping Beech* (2021) video still

An interest in engaging with trees is not that surprising today; there is renewed interest in plant life in general and in trees and forests in particular, due to massive forest fires, tropical rainforest destruction and debates on carbon sinks and how to best mitigate climate change. And trees are historically venerated in many parts of the world, beginning with the myth of the world tree Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, to trees as links to ancestors or guardians of the homestead. The European view of the forest is of an area of danger, a lawless area outside human civilization, but also as “the birthplace of nations”<sup>580</sup>, while ancient trees are sometimes treated almost like cathedrals or holy places. It is the idea of performing with trees that raises eyebrows, especially if one suggests that the trees are performing and not merely serving as a backdrop or support for a human performer. This brings us to one of the first questions to

580 Schama 1996, 6.

consider when performing with trees, the first question I tried to address, which is: Who or what can perform?

The question might seem redundant from a visual arts perspective, considering the amount of living plants participating in various installations in museums today. For many scholars of theater, dance and music, however, performance is a human activity that involves performers and an audience. Performance studies scholars have expanded the idea of performance to include the performance of the self in everyday life<sup>581</sup> and the performance of social dramas.<sup>582</sup> Within contemporary art, the legacy of Alan Kaprow’s everyday performances<sup>583</sup> could probably be extended to include plants. Following a conventional use of the term, we can fairly easily understand the act of performing for camera as a performance; the camera takes on the role of the audience. When the camera is turned on, the performance begins, and when turned off, the performance ends. This kind of understanding of performance excludes, however, other types of performances whose emphasis is on action and process and the performativity of cultural norms such as gender<sup>584</sup> rather than the role of the witness or spectator. Most importantly, there are other meanings of “performance”, such as an accomplishment, “a peak performance”; the execution of an action in “high performance technology”; and a regulatory principle in business and organizations, as in the demand to “perform or else”.<sup>585</sup> In this sense, plants do perform their complicated and sophisticated life processes all the time.

581 Goffman 1971 [1959].

582 Turner 1982.

583 Kaprow 2003.

584 Butler 1990.

585 Mckenzie 2001.

For example, an anthology of critical plant studies called *The Green Thread – Dialogues with the Vegetal World*<sup>586</sup> refers to the idea of plants performing. In their introduction, editors Patricia Vieira, Monica Gagliano and John Ryan note how today “performance refers to events outside of the theater-based dyad of human audience, and specifically embraces the transactions of everyday life”.<sup>587</sup> They apply this extended understanding to plants: “More inclusively conceived, a performer (or actant; here also the plant) does (or conveys) something and a spectator (or participant) observes (or interacts) with something.”<sup>588</sup> They also note that despite the skepticism this might evoke, “performance as an aspect of the everyday seems eminently suited to the reconceptualization of the vegetal world as performative”.<sup>589</sup>

When considering the performances of plants, they ask, “what sorts of activities should constitute their performativity, as well as our performances with and of them?”<sup>590</sup> They present two broad categories: first “the intrinsic performativity of plants”, which refers to “their ecological poiesis: bearing seeds, irrupting in flowers, sprouting rhizomes, uncoiling leaves, attracting pollinators, garnering human attention, and mobilizing transnational networks”.<sup>591</sup> Second, “living plants are also made to perform”, they note, “in (and as) topiaries, gardens, parks, reserves, varieties, cultivars, hybrids, genetically modified crops, and even works of art”.<sup>592</sup> In a footnote, they further explain their standpoint: “In using the term performative, we are suggesting that plants actually and materially (not rhetorically or meta-

586 Vieira, Gagliano, Ryan 2015.

587 Vieira, Gagliano, Ryan 2015, vxiii.

588 Ibid.

589 Ibid.

590 Ibid.

591 Ibid.

592 Ibid.

phorically) perform, and that the paradigm of performance offers a promising framework for rethinking human-plant relations.”<sup>593</sup> Aware “of J. L. Austin’s understanding of performativity as a form of speech that actuates something and should not be appraised as true or false”, they propose that “the implications of Austin’s position for critical plant studies would be an intriguing addition to the field”.<sup>594</sup>

From a performance studies perspective, Travis Brisini, in his text “Phytomorphising Performance”,<sup>595</sup> offers an account of how plants can be understood as performing with the help of semiotics and the definition of modular growth as a kind of restored behavior. He suggests that performance theory has “radically overlooked the plants, and that doing so has foreshortened the performance paradigm”, and therefore he deems it necessary to consider “both what performance might mean for plants, as well as what plants might mean for performance”, and to take on “the task of phytomorphizing performance”.<sup>596</sup> Brisini claims that we “impoverish the conceptual utility of the performance concept when we equate performance, writ large, with human performance”, whether limited to the abilities of the human body or to representation with “linguistic or other semiotic systems”, that is, if we “cannot conceive of a performance that exceeds the temporal, motile, and corporeal scale of humanity”.<sup>597</sup>

Brisini goes through a list of objections to plants as performers, beginning with performance understood as activity, as restored or twice-behaved behavior, as purposive and mutable, as well as

593 Vieira, Gagliano, Ryan 2015, note 32, xxiv.

594 Ibid.

595 Brisini 2019.

596 Brisini 2019, 3.

597 Brisini 2019, 4–5.

something focused on communication.<sup>598</sup> He discusses the question of plant intentionality as a requirement of performance, referring to biologist Anthony Trewavas, for whom it is linked to “emergent intentionality as swarm behaviour” and philosopher Michael Marder, who sees growth as “the plant’s manifestation of intentionality”, while focusing especially on Agnes Arber’s idea of “morphological behavior”, wherein the action of plants consists of changes to form and discarding or growing parts.<sup>599</sup> Based on Arber’s notion of form production as behavior, Brisini develops the idea of plant modularity as a type of restored behavior, in which “the modularity of plants – each module – is a behavioral ‘act’, a simultaneously formal and functional intentional gesture by the plant”.<sup>600</sup> Moreover, he suggests that “these behaviors are replicated – reiterated again and again – by plants, shifted and ‘restored’ through each performance of growth, adapted to environmental conditions”.<sup>601</sup> He concludes that “[t]he material form we call ‘plants’ are, in reality, the embodied traces of restored, behavioral performances”.<sup>602</sup> We could say that vegetal beings perform by creating themselves; their form is the documentation of their performances.

Brisini goes on to discuss the problem of communication and “whether plants intentionally undertake material/behavioral restorations to express some condition or to offer message-content to an audience”.<sup>603</sup> He refers to the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, further developed by Eduardo Kohn, who understands life

598 Brisini 2019, 5–6.

599 Brisini 2019, 9–10.

600 Brisini 2019, 10.

601 Ibid.

602 Ibid.

603 Brisini 2019, 11.

as a sign process and living creatures as existing biosemiotically.<sup>604</sup> Even though plants do not engage in symbolic communication, their characteristics serve as “embodied sign vehicles”,<sup>605</sup> Brisini suggests. Moreover, he reminds us that the dialogical model is only one form of communication, and monological communication or dissemination is widely used by plants.<sup>606</sup> Their communication can be rather audience-specific, as in the famous examples of orchids mimicking wasps, described by Deleuze and Guattari, and other cases in which mimicking takes place via odor.<sup>607</sup> Noting Kohn’s idea that “a continuity exists between human and nonhuman modes of representation”, Brisini claims performance to be an important aspect of living, because “the logic of action, restoration of behavior, and communicative exchange we dub ‘performance’ is an important component of” the “multispecies interaction and engagement that gets summed up as *life itself*”.<sup>608</sup>

Rather than expand the notion of representation beyond the human, Karen Barad’s posthumanist performativity<sup>609</sup> rethinks performativity beyond representation. Her expanded idea of performance that is not restricted to humans is based on quantum physics: in the famous experiment, electrons perform as wave or particle, depending on the experimental arrangement. In this same sense, we could understand trees, plants, fungi and microbes, as well as humans, as performing their life all the time, not primarily in the sense of showing their life to other beings – although that too takes place – but in performing their life operations on a cellular level, as

604 Brisini 2019, 12.

605 Brisini 2019, 11.

606 Ibid.

607 Brisini 2019, 12–13.

608 Brisini 2019, 14.

609 Barad 2003.

well as in symbiotic collaboration within larger organisms. Following Barad, we can think of performances taking place everywhere all the time. For her, meaning and intelligibility are not human-based notions, because “meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility”.<sup>610</sup> Plants too, participate in this ongoing performance of the world.

If we agree with this expanded understanding of performance, there are at least two kinds of performances taking place in my performing with trees: On the one hand, the general performance going on in the world, like the exchange of breath – of oxygen and carbon dioxide – between me and the tree, as well as other trans-corporeal exchanges taking place; and on the other hand, there is the specific performance framed by the camera. The act of recording is relatively easy to understand as a performance, as mentioned before; the framing transforms the action performed for camera into a performance. The camera takes on the role of audience and functions like a traditional curtain: When the camera is on, the performance begins, and when it is off, the performance ends.

The act of recording also means framing an image and cutting it out of the surroundings, a slice of time with a beginning and end, for instance, a shared period of time with a tree. The framing, an agential cut<sup>611</sup> of sorts, is the result of intra-actions of the apparatus in question, the environmental circumstances and material-discursive practices, such as compositional choices. This agential cut, however, is not to be confused with a human decision; it is the result of intra-actions involving the camera, tripod, tree, weather, editing conventions and all kinds of cultural and theoretical ideas and material-discursive practices, including ones concerning authorship and

610 Barad 2007, 335.

611 Barad 2007, 139.

agency. This agential cut that designates what is included in the video and what is excluded from mattering extracts a specific performance from the general performance that is going on between us and in the world.

Understanding the relationship between a human performer and other beings in the environment from such a posthumanist and new-materialist perspective might seem counter-intuitive at first, if we tend to understand performance as an intentional act in front of an audience. If we see performance as an engagement, as action and process, it is easier to understand how we perform with the life-forms and phenomena around us, including plants. When performing with a tree, we actually pose for the camera together, the tree and I, although one could also say that I am in fact using the tree as my performance partner without their consent or even treating the tree as a set or prop for my performance. Admittedly, rather than trying to make myself understandable to the tree or trying to understand the tree's wishes or needs, I take its willingness to collaborate more or less for granted. How can I then say that I am performing with a tree, that we are performing together?

Although I try to train my sensitivity to detect any possible reluctance from the tree, I can never be sure what is relevant intuitive knowledge and what is pure fantasy. Despite the lack of reliable communication between us – I am not using technology to register reactions or changes in the life processes of the tree, for example – we could nevertheless be understood as performing together. Above and elsewhere,<sup>612</sup> I have suggested that we share the same image space, much as we share the space in the woods. We appear or occur together in the world and in the artwork.

612 Arlander 2019a.

Even if we are reluctant to accept the idea of plants performing, plants nevertheless do appear in the sense that they are on display. This distinction is clear in Finnish, which has two different words for performing: the transitive *esittää*, which denotes the act or process of presenting “something” for somebody (as a musician playing a piece), and the intransitive *esiintyä*, which refers to the performer in the process of being on display. (Both words have a whole spectrum of other meanings, not relevant in this context). In Finnish the word *esiintyä* or “appear” does not have the philosophical connotation of appearance as opposed to truth or reality, but is linked to being visible, in the front (*esillä*). It is in the latter sense that I use “appear” in this context; one can think of an actor who must appear or be on display on stage to present or perform a role. The difference between the two verbs is perhaps best explained by a musician who exclaimed, “Unfortunately, you cannot perform (*esittää*, to present) music without performing (*esiintyä*, to appear on stage).” And perhaps this distinction between the two modes of performing - presenting and appearing - “showing something” and “showing oneself” or “being on display” can help us see how trees perform.

Understanding plants as appearing seems to be in accord with the proposal by Michael Marder in “To Hear Plants Speak”, positing that “plants articulate themselves with themselves”.<sup>613</sup> Plants “articulate the burgeoning emergence, or self-generated appearance, that distinguishes the Greek conception of nature or *phusis*”,<sup>614</sup> and they “stand for the principle of a material living expression as such, demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself”, he writes.<sup>615</sup> If this is the case for plants, why not for

613 Marder 2017, 120.

614 Ibid.

615 Marder 2017, 122.

human beings as well? Could I not try to appear and signify myself with the trees?

According to Marder, plants form “living bridges between the elements”, and the “connections they forge are nothing short of the language of life itself”.<sup>616</sup> For Marder, the world “happens in between”, and his claim that plants form a world “is simply to emphasize that they institute relations of lived and living significance between things”.<sup>617</sup> Such relations of living significance between things presumably take place between trees and the human performer as well. Moreover, Marder suggests that “plants articulate in their language devoid of words ... [f]irst of all, themselves”, and in so doing “they reaffirm vegetal being, which, through them, becomes more spatially pervasive”.<sup>618</sup> Perhaps humans could articulate and reaffirm their being together with plants. At least we should try to understand, appreciate and acknowledge our dependence on plants.

Plants are the true artists of the world, engaged in a continuous creation. According to Marder, “plants are the artists of sensuous appearances, offering untold aesthetic riches to whomever they attract” and are therefore “the artists of being”. Moreover, “they are performative creatures par excellence, the artists of themselves.” As their “self-creation and self-recreation” takes its cues from the circumstances they live in, “the artistry of plants that make themselves is, therefore, of one piece with the world”.<sup>619</sup> This is something to learn from the plants or to try to practice with them. Entering a time and space at least slightly closer to that of vegetal beings, even if partly in imagery or imagination, is a way to engage with, absorb from and participate in their modes of self-creation and self-recreation.

616 Marder 2017, 122.

617 Ibid.

618 Marder 2017, 120.

619 Marder 2018, n.p.n.



## Performing “with”



*Practicing with Pines - balancing (2022), video still*

Performing with Plants started with the question of how to perform landscape today, focusing on plants and especially trees. It soon evolved into exploring what it means to be “performing with” entities unlike us. How can we live, exist, act or perform with creatures with whom we cannot communicate directly or even ask for their consent when posing for a camera with them? As Michael Marder notes, “living with” is a core task for humanity,<sup>620</sup> or, in Donna Haraway’s words: “We become-with each other or not at all.”<sup>621</sup> If plants’ way of living “is a mode of being in relation to all the others”,<sup>622</sup> learning from plants could be a way to begin.

“In keeping with twentieth century philosophy, living is ‘living with’”, Marder writes, or “cohabitation in a community mediated not by the immutable bonds of common essence but by the non-essen-

620 Marder 2013a, 53.

621 Haraway 2016, 4.

622 Marder 2013a, 51.

tial (or better, pre-essential) difference inherent in existence”.<sup>623</sup> His notion of community is based on “difference having simultaneously dispensed with the individual as the atomic unit of analysis”.<sup>624</sup> For him, “the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with”, and thus “we have a lot to learn from plants that have mastered this way of being”.<sup>625</sup>

Moreover, the plant kingdom is so large that it is hard to imagine any general way of performing with plants. To perform with shrubs the size of lichen and to perform with a pine tree demand different approaches, although we all collaborate by exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide and other chemical substances in the atmosphere. As an artist, I take such general physiological knowledge for granted and leave it to colleagues working in the field of bio art to figure out how to perform together on a molecular level. While performing with trees, I stick to the level of everyday actions, like sitting or standing in, on, with and next to trees, perhaps hanging from a branch. I do insist on performing with the trees though and usually insert my body into the image, rather than leave them to perform on their own, a solution that might seem strange to visual artists who focus on vegetal performance. There is a risk that the performances of the plants themselves, like the spectacular flowering of the “corpse plant” (introduced in the editorial to an issue of performance philosophy devoted to plants),<sup>626</sup> are thereby overlooked due to human presence, which easily leaves the vegetal partner to serve as backdrop.

In a text called “Performing with trees – landscape and artistic research”,<sup>627</sup> I looked at various approaches to trees in my works on

623 Marder 2013a, 50.

624 Ibid.

625 Marder 2013a, 51.

626 Gibson and Sandilands 2021, 1.

627 Arlander 2010. An edited version of the text is published as chapter 9.1. in

performing landscape to date, beginning with radio plays. In that text, I distinguish between two different strategies: performing *as* trees and performing *with* trees. Performing *as* trees is a strategy used in *Trees Talk*, a series of short site-specific (or tree-specific) audio plays or monologues beginning in 2003, in which the human narrator speaks, in a fairy tale manner, as if a tree.<sup>628</sup> Performing *with* trees is a strategy used in most of my video works. To begin with, trees were part of the environment and served as more or less prominent elements when focusing on changes in the landscape. Later, trees became performance partners in their own right, core collaborators, so to speak, which meant I had to consider the ethical challenges involved.

In the context of theater studies,<sup>629</sup> I have recently presented some further distinctions for performing with plants. There are several possible strategies when linking plants and performance – and most of these strategies could be extended to other lifeforms as well. With conventional performances involving performers and spectators, there are two options: 1) plants perform for humans, for example in the display of flowers and fruits,<sup>630</sup> in the sonification of their life processes<sup>631</sup> or drawing with the help of specific tools<sup>632</sup> and 2) humans perform for plants, for example when playing music for plants, as in a concert for houseplants during the pandemic<sup>633</sup> or in

Arlander 2012, 244-254.

628 For a list of talking trees, see <https://annettearlander.com/current-projects/talking-trees/>

629 Arlander 2020b, 124-126.

630 Pollan 2002.

631 See, for example, Marcus Maeder's *Trees: Pinus Silvestris* and also the *Fern Orchestra*.

632 See, for example, Tuula Närhinen's *Windtracers*.

633 Eugenio Ampudia in Barcelona 16.6.2020. <https://www.liceubarcelona.cat/en/artist-eugenio-ampudia-inaugurates-activity-liceu-concert-2292-plants>

projects like *Dance for Plants*.<sup>634</sup> With a theatrical understanding of performance, which involves performing as somebody else in a role or as a character, there are two options as well: 1) Humans perform as plants, with historical examples such as Loie Fuller's choreographies on floral themes.<sup>635</sup> 2) Plants perform as humans, as in Mathilde Roussel's *Lives of Grass*,<sup>636</sup> in which vegetation is used as material for sculptures of humans.

Performing with plants could be considered a fifth category, which can be divided into at least three types, depending on location: 1) Plants perform with humans in human spaces of display, such as on stages or in museums. Examples abound,<sup>637</sup> including Spela Petric's endurance performance *Skotopoiesis*,<sup>638</sup> in which the standing artist casts a shadow onto growing water cress. 2) Plants perform with humans where plants grow, such as fields and forests. Examples include aerial dancers performing with trees,<sup>639</sup> activists living in trees to protect them<sup>640</sup> and participatory performances like *Standing with the Saguaro*, where participants stood with a saguaro cactus in the desert.<sup>641</sup> 4) Plants perform with humans, entangled within the same organism, as in some forms of bio art, such as the

634 Dance for Plants research collective <http://www.danceforplants.com>

635 Such as *Violet* (1892), *The Flowers* (1893), and *Une Pluie de fleurs* (1898). (Schwan 2016, 271).

636 Roussel, Mathilde: *Lives of Grass* <https://anti-utopias.com/art/mathilde-roussel-lives-of-grass/>

637 Essi Kausalainen performing with her house plants, as in *My Name is Monstera* or Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan performing with a bonsai in *Tree Duet*, described in Davies 2011, 55.

638 Petric, Spela: *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis* <http://www.spelapetric.org>

639 Rubio, Anna: [http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/anna\\_rubio\\_all\\_the\\_trees\\_i\\_met](http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/anna_rubio_all_the_trees_i_met)

640 Philp 2018.

641 Eisele 2014.

“plantimal” called *Edunia* by Eduarco Kac, a genetic hybrid of the artist and a petunia.<sup>642</sup>

Whether to speak of humans performing with plants or plants performing with humans depends on emphasis, although a small human figure easily turns into the main character, even when next to a giant tree. Performing “with” could also be understood as the use of tools, as in writing with a pen. In that sense, quite a few of our performances and actions when making art take place with plants as materials and tools: in colors and inks, in paper and textiles, in anything made of wood and so on. The examples of performing with plants in the projects *Performing with Plants and Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* have usually taken place with trees or shrubs, in their company or next to them in the places where they grow.

In terms of ethical guidelines for “performing with” plants, I began by formulating a few basic rules of thumb,<sup>643</sup> including not to hurt the plant and to choose plants bigger and stronger than me and plants that can share some of their energy with me, such as trees; to visit the plants where they grow and to respect their particular relationship to place; to spend time with the plants and visit them repeatedly, for although I cannot share the temporality of the plant, I can at least respect their relationship to time. The problem of asking for consent, a key issue in collaboration of any kind, I have not managed to solve in a satisfactory manner. How could a tree have the option to deny consent, to say “no” in some manner?

Performing with plants involves many ethical challenges, depending on the type of performance in question. In a conversation with

642 Kac 2011.

643 Arlander HCAS blog post 4.12.2017. <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/hcasblog/2017/12/04/the-tree-calendar-or-performing-with-plants-in-the-parks-of-helsinki/>

Michael Marder, art historian Prudence Gibson brings some of these challenges to the fore, such as the problem of representation when art tries to speak “on behalf” of plants. Another challenge is the use of technology, because plants are sometimes subjected to technological devices in a manner never acceptable for animals. Gibson further mentions the problem of writing: What would be the right way to speak and write of plants? Performativity too involves the risk of stressing the subject–object polarization, she maintains, especially if the performer is a plant and the viewer a human being. Marder emphasizes how “the performativity of plants is their mode of being in the world, their affecting and being affected by the places of their growth”, and how this never-completed, ongoing process “has its intermediate ‘products’, akin to stills taken from a film”, the “very identifiable self-expressions of vegetal life”. According to Marder, artists might, for example, facilitate vegetal self-expression.<sup>644</sup> Thus, various works involving gardening could be considered a relevant form of performing with plants.<sup>645</sup>

Marder proposes the notion of expressivity as a tool when thinking of plants and art, not in the romantic sense, as the expression of something inner, but as a pressing outwards, as the movement that takes place when plants grow.<sup>646</sup> Gibson connects the three aspects of an event discussed by Marder, namely “excrecence (how plants appear), expectation (waiting for germination) and exception (where seeds are extracted for the closed circuit of potentiality and are committed to chance)” and relates these to the creation and experience of art. “Artists create works or performances that are viewed (have an appearance), they await a response from the audience, or critics,

644 Gibson & Marder 2016, n.p.n.

645 Artists working with gardening include, for example, Malin Lobell <http://malinlobell.se> and Eggle Oddo [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eggle\\_Oddo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eggle_Oddo)

646 Gibson & Marder 2016, n.p.n.

or peers, in a state of hiatus”, and “artists’ works are removed from the live experience or real appearance and can be re-performed or re-told or re-experienced via video documentation and reviews etc.” Marder agrees and notes that as we can think of philosophy as sublimated plant thinking, art could be understood as sublimated plant sensing. “Aesthesis, at the root of sensation and aesthetics, is not the exclusive province of animals and humans”, he notes, because “plants are highly receptive to a variety of environmental factors, from light and moisture gradients to vibrations”, and the fact that plants “neither think nor see in images ... does not mean that they neither think nor see”, he adds.<sup>647</sup>

To consider art a form of sublimated plant sensing does not necessarily help when thinking of possible ways to perform with plants in a reasonably acceptable manner. How does one engage with creatures with whom we cannot communicate directly and whose consent to being recorded we cannot assure? In some traditions, permission is asked for and awaited as a sign in some form. In the project, I tried to follow the simple guidelines mentioned above, which could be considered a kind of ethical minimum: 1) not to hurt the plant and to choose plants that can share some of their energy, such as trees; 2) to visit the plant where it grows and to respect its particular relationship to place; 3) to spend time with the plant or to visit it repeatedly, to respect its relationship to time.<sup>648</sup> These guidelines are relatively easy to follow in my manner of performing with plants, although they might be problematic for other types of performances.

647 Gibson & Marder 2016, n.p.n.

648 Arlander HCAS blog post 4.12.2017.

If we demand that the collaboration be of mutual benefit in order to be ethically sound as, for example, Matthew Hall proposes,<sup>649</sup> these principles are obviously not enough. Hall asks: “What shape should human-plant ethics take? How can we move from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care? How can plants be incorporated into dialogical relationships?”<sup>650</sup> This last question is central to performing with plants. Hall recommends “the recognition of plants as other-than-human persons”, as “a powerful way of incorporating plants within social and moral relationships of care and nurturing”. He notes, in contrast to animal rights theory, that “persons are not exempt from use”.<sup>651</sup> Humans must eat plants, but this should be done with ethical awareness, Hall points out. “Human persons must act harmfully toward plant persons in order to live and the necessary harm done to plant and animal persons is accepted, ritualized and celebrated as a fact of being alive.”<sup>652</sup> The important choice is “to only harm plant persons when necessary and to encourage the growth of plants where possible”.<sup>653</sup>

Hall distinguishes three key areas in which “an ethic of dialogical respect can begin”.<sup>654</sup> The first is “lessening the wastage of plant lives – that is, treating plant lives as nothing” and thus committing “unnecessary harm to plants”.<sup>655</sup> Second is “the sheer (predominantly Western) overconsumption of plant products”, which is an “identifiable threat to plant well-being”.<sup>656</sup> A third area of concern is “the unnecessary, unthinking use of plants”, for example, “to feed mas-

649 Hall 2011, 156.

650 Ibid.

651 Hall 2011, 161.

652 Ibid.

653 Ibid.

654 Hall 2011, 163.

655 Ibid.

656 Hall 2011, 164.

sive numbers of animals for the world's wealthiest nations to consume".<sup>657</sup> Rather, "[u]nderstanding that plants are active, self-directed, even intelligent beings" Hall points out, "must be realized through working closely with plants in collaborative projects of mutual benefit". Such collaboration has "the potential to shift the view of nature as an organic, homogenized whole – which ... contributes to the backgrounding of nature",<sup>658</sup> he adds.

Experiments involving sustainable gardening could potentially serve as examples of such projects of mutual benefit. Performing or posing for camera with trees cannot be considered of mutual benefit in the same way, and it is questionable if they should be called performing "with" in the true sense of "together with". Perhaps such projects actually resemble performing with the trees as tools, instrumentalizing them for human benefit. Artists often like to think that to focus attention on grievances, injustices, socially or politically neglected issues of concern is sufficient reason for a work or performance to be made and perhaps for some of its ethically questionable aspects as well. The more we learn about plants and their ways of living, their capacities for sensing and thinking, the more problematic an objectifying and instrumental relationship to plants becomes. At the same time, environmental degradation, the climate crisis, the decline in biodiversity and the rapid extinction of species poses new demands on artists to create works with immediate effect. Some years ago, I thought that, all things considered, performing with plants was still easier than constantly negotiating with other humans. Today, I am no longer so sure. That said, performing, living and collaborating with plants is necessary for human survival.

657 Hall 2011, 165.

658 Hall 2011, 169.

## Plants thinking



*Practicing with Pines* – writing (2022), video still

The concept of performing plants is acceptable with an expanded understanding of performance, but what about thinking? How should our understanding of thinking evolve in order to make space for "thinking" plants? In his book *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2011), mentioned above, Matthew Hall propagates the "recognition of plants as persons" and "puts forward the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives".<sup>659</sup> He investigates "the marginalization of plants using the themes of radical separation, zoocentrism (an animal-centred outlook), exclusion, and hierarchical value ordering" and suggests "that these notions predominate in Western discussions of plant ontology".<sup>660</sup> He notes how "[i]n order to maintain hierarchical ordering, the continuity of life has been ignored in favour of constructing sharp discontinuities between hu-

659 Ibid.

660 Hall 2011, 4.

mans, plants, and animals”<sup>661</sup> while “shared characteristics such as life and growth have been rejected in order to focus on the gross differences”.<sup>662</sup> Hall endorses structuring relationships “in a heterarchy rather than a hierarchy” and emphasizes a “recognition of connectedness in the face of alterity” in contrast to the predominant “Western ethic of exclusion”.<sup>663</sup> The Aristotelian distinction of the vegetal (nutritive), animal (sensible) and human (rational) soul; the medieval “Great Chain of Being”, with rocks at the bottom and humans at the top, albeit below angels and God; as well as the division of the world into mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms by Linnaeus in 1735 all influence our understanding of plants or rather our lack of understanding.

In his study *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Michael Marder offers a critique of this legacy, following Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics, emphasizing the dispersed life of plants and their divisibility rather than their individuality.<sup>664</sup> He speaks of “vegetal democracy”, a principle that concerns all species without exception, and notes how “the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an onto-political effect of plant-soul” that must “eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority”.<sup>665</sup> Marder considers Hall’s idea of regarding plants as persons a misplaced understanding of plants’ mode of being; instead of extending personhood to plants, Marder challenges humans to recognize the planthood in themselves. Thinking is not the privilege of the human subject, Marder points out. He develops a post-metaphysical way of

661 Hall 2011, 157.

662 Ibid.

663 Hall 2011, 11.

664 Marder 2013a, 53.

665 Ibid.

thinking with the help of “the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought, which is both an idealizing and an idealized permutation of plant-thinking”.<sup>666</sup> Marder speaks of the “non-conscious intentionality of vegetal life”, which he understands as an “essentialism-free way of thinking that is fluid, receptive, dispersed, non-oppositional, non-representational, immanent, and material-practical”, if these descriptors are understood as separate from their metaphysical context.<sup>667</sup> Thinking like a plant means to think without adhering to formal logic and therefore in some sense, not to think. If a human being thinks like a plant, they will become a plant, because destroying classical *logos* removes the aspect that distinguishes us from other living beings, Marder notes – adhering to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s suggestion to follow plants by engaging in irreverent plant-thinking on the path of becoming-plant.<sup>668</sup>

Marder introduces the notion “it thinks” to emphasize that thinking is not the sole privilege of humans: “In place of the Kantian transcendental synthesis of *I think* that supposedly accompanies all my representations,” he writes, “plant-thinking posits *it thinks*, a much more impersonal, non-subjective, and non-anthropomorphic agency.”<sup>669</sup> This vegetal “it thinks” refers to a much more undecided subject and might mean, for instance, a tree that thinks or thinking that happens in-between. According to Marder, “it thinks” is not concerned with the question “who or what does the thinking?” but “when and where does the thinking happen?” Such thinking arises from and returns to the plant’s embeddedness in the environment.<sup>670</sup> It is “altering the form of thought (which becomes inseparable

666 Marder 2013a, 152.

667 Ibid.

668 Marder 2013a, 165.

669 Ibid.

670 Marder 2013a, 169.

arable from its opposite, the non-thought)” as well as “changing its content” (which includes contradictions). Thus, “‘non-identical thinking’ indicates freedom from the substantive and self-enclosed identity of the thinkers themselves”.<sup>671</sup> Or, as Marder bluntly states: “Plant-thinking starts with the explosion of identity.”<sup>672</sup>

When exploring the conditions for plant-thinking, Marder notes that it takes place first of all “*when* the presumed self-identity of ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ that populate a given milieu recedes” and allows “a rhizomatic assemblage to surge up to the foreground, to be activated by sharing difference among its various nodes”.<sup>673</sup> And, secondly, in situations “*where* the spacings and connections, communication lines and gaps between the participants in this assemblage prevail over what is delimited within them”.<sup>674</sup> Thinking, like the functioning of the brain, is rhizomatic: “When *it thinks*, it does so non-hierarchically and, like the growing grass, keeps close to the ground, to existence, to the immanence of what is ‘here below’.”<sup>675</sup> Moreover, Marder’s formulation defines the thinker as well: “At the core of the subject who proclaims: ‘I think’, lies the subjectless vegetal *it thinks*, at once shoring up and destabilizing the thinking of this ‘I’.”<sup>676</sup> Thus, rather than emphasizing the personhood of plants, we should consider the plant-like base of our own personhood.

Preferring to understand plants as persons, Hall claims that “to place plants in the ontological category of persons is neither fanciful nor deluded”.<sup>677</sup> For Hall, “the inclusion of plants in relation-

671 Marder 2013a, 165.

672 Marder 2013a, 43.

673 Marder 2013a, 169.

674 Ibid.

675 Ibid.

676 Marder 2013a, 170.

677 Hall 2011, 11.

ships of care is based upon close observation of plant life history and the recognition of shared attributes between all beings”.<sup>678</sup> He argues for “recognizing plants as subjects deserving of respect as other-than-human persons” and “advocates including plants within human ethical awareness”.<sup>679</sup> Hall insists that “the recognition of plants as autonomous, perceptive, intelligent beings must filter into our dealings with the plant world”, because a “purely instrumental relationships with plants no longer fits the evidence that we have of plant attributes, characteristics, and life histories”, nor are they compatible with “the interconnectedness of life on Earth”.<sup>680</sup> Hall notes that “the intellectual basis for treatments of plant life as inert, vacant, raw materials is demonstrably false”, and therefore “the exclusion of plants from human moral consideration is no longer appropriate”.<sup>681</sup>

In his response to Marder’s critique,<sup>682</sup> Hall underlines that there are several ways to understand personhood, and not all of them project human attributes onto plants. Hall propagates a relational approach to personhood, wherein “the basic relational nature of the self means that moral worth is not to be found in individual capacities or in the membership of a species, but within relationships”.<sup>683</sup> Hall would not “contest the fact that plants have radical morphological differences with humans”,<sup>684</sup> but he disagrees with Marder’s attempt to emphasize the radical alterity of plant beings and rejects the idea of “deepening our appreciation of such oth-

678 Hall 2011, 11.

679 Hall 2011, 157.

680 Hall 2011, 13.

681 Hall 2011, 156.

682 Marder 2013b, 37 (footnote 5).

683 Hall 2019, 3.

684 Hall 2019, 9.

erness”.<sup>685</sup> Rather, he “seeks affinity with plants and deliberately takes a relational, inclusive stance, which emphasizes our connections” inspired by indigenous animist cultures, as well as Jain and Buddhist traditions.<sup>686</sup> Hall asserts that “it is more appropriate in our ‘manner of speaking’ to accord plants moral status, to relate to them as persons, than to treat them as an inexhaustible supply of ‘raw materials’ here only for human ends”.<sup>687</sup> Hall refers to Erazim Kohák’s idea that “manners of speaking” are “modes of interacting with reality” and can “render our world meaningful and guide our actions therein”.<sup>688</sup>

The problem of personhood can also be viewed in legal, rather than anthropological or philosophical, terms. In “Nature as a Legal Person” (2015), Dinah Shelton provides an overview of various political attempts to grant legal personhood to animals, specific ecosystems such as rivers and even nature as a whole to ensure the possibility to defend their rights in court. Shelton also discusses some of the limitations of this approach, depending on who is appointed “guardian” or representative of the legal person and who exactly is deemed responsible for the restorative actions to be carried out.<sup>689</sup> The idea of conceptualizing environmental protection as a human rights issue could in itself be seen as a limitation, perhaps based more on expediency in a critical situation of imminent exploitation, degradation or disaster, rather than an understanding of humans as integral to the planet, the biosphere and nature.

Two responses to the document published by a Swiss ethical committee in 2008, *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants:*

685 Hall 2019, 9.

686 Ibid.

687 Hall 2019, 12.

688 Kohák 1992, 385, quoted in Hall 2019, 12.

689 Shelton 2015, 10–11.

*Moral Consideration of Plants for Their Own Sake*, dealing with the rights of plants, can serve as examples of recent discussions among plant scientists regarding our ethical responsibilities towards plants. Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola (2015) discuss the document as a first attempt, a beginning in acknowledging the rights of plants. In contrast, Daniel Chamovitz (2017) mentions the same document as a warning of what an anthropomorphic outlook can lead to.

In their popular book *Brilliant Green* (2015), Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, proponents of plant intelligence and vegetal neurobiology, conclude by discussing the dignity of plants. “Considering the scientific evidence accumulated in recent decades”, they find it “unsurprising when the Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology (ECNH), established in 1998 by the Swiss General Assembly” published “a document entitled *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants: Moral Consideration of Plants for Their Own Sake*” in late 2008. They insist that “the reference to plants’ dignity can be understood as a first step toward legitimising their rights, independent of human interests”.<sup>690</sup> Although they admit that there is much controversy related to plant life, they stress how “the Swiss Bioethics Committee – moral philosophers, molecular biologists, naturalists and ecologist – unanimously agreed: plants cannot be treated arbitrarily. Their indiscriminate destruction is morally unjustifiable”.<sup>691</sup>

In an updated version of another popular book, *What a Plant Knows* (2017), author Daniel Chamovitz takes up the same document to discuss the dangers of anthropomorphism: “For example, in 2008 the Swiss government established an ethics committee to protect the ‘dignity’ of plants” although “[a] brainless plant likely

690 Mancuso & Viola 2015, 158.

691 Mancuso & Viola 2015, 159.



does not worry about its dignity". He suggests that the "attempt at bestowing dignity on plants mirrors our own attempt at defining our relationship with the plant world".<sup>692</sup> He emphasizes the capacities of plants to be aware of their surroundings and suggests that "[w]e should see a very long-lost cousin" in a plant, "knowing that we can discern complex environments just as it can, knowing that we share common genes". He also stresses, however, that our "shared genetic past does not negate eons of separate evolution", and although we "maintain parallel abilities to sense and be aware of the physical world, the independent paths of evolution have led to a uniquely human capacity, beyond intelligence, that plants don't have: the ability to care".<sup>693</sup> Thus, he emphasizes, on the one hand, the way plants are aware of their surroundings, their capacity to see, smell, their sense of touch, their memory and more; on the other hand, he is keen to distinguish these capacities from human qualities such as feelings or suffering. Pain is discomfort caused by some kind of damage, and plants can experience that, while suffering involves higher cognitive capacities and requires a brain. Chamovitz stresses human emotions and notes how relationships that people caring for plants can have with their nurslings resemble the fantasy friends of children: the relationship is imagined and one-sided. Although plants can distinguish changes in their environment, they cannot create or maintain separate relationships the same way a human being can.

Following this line of thought, as I perform with or write to trees, I do it as, with or to fantasy friends, in principle conscious of possibly existing for them only as part of their surroundings and aware that they cannot participate in the "play" on equal terms. If

692 Chamovitz 2012/2017, 162.

693 Chamovitz 2012/2017, 163.

we think of plants as our distant relatives, however – even though we do not really understand each other's languages or manners – are they perhaps more than fantasy friends? Seen as nonhuman persons, my repeated performances with trees could be understood as attempts to contact or as gestures of respect, even if not collaborative projects of mutual benefit. In fact, I often use the trees as my support by sitting on them, hanging from them and so on. And for the viewer, the trees might seem rather like a setting for my performance, not as co-performers or collaborators. To regard a tree one repeatedly visits for a long time as a person with whom to enter into a temporary dialogical relationship makes sense, although this kind of approach might not be as easy with other types of vegetation. Further, what about the trees only briefly encountered and recorded? Did I treat them as persons? Not really. However, I did consider them as individuals, not only representatives of their species but as specific beings growing in particular circumstances in a specific manner and thus with a history of their own. This is emphasized in the title of the project, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.

## Thinking as learning



*Esteemed Tarri Pine* (2021), video still

Learning from plants and collaborating with them is at the core of the notion of the Planthropocene, proposed “half cheekily and half seriously” by anthropologist Natasha Myers (2017). The Planthropocene “does not name a time-bound era” but is rather “a call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings”,<sup>694</sup> she writes. It is “an aspirational episteme and way of doing life in which people come to recognize their profound inter-implication with plants”.<sup>695</sup> Myer’s focus is on gardens and garden design: “A well-tended garden, whether in a bucket or on board a space station, provides a stage for plants and people to perform their entangled powers.”<sup>696</sup> She notes how “some garden designs have the potential to stage both new scenes of, and new ways to see (and even seed)”<sup>697</sup> collaborations between people and plants. She

694 Myers 2017, 4.

695 Myers 2017, 3.

696 Myers 2017, 1.

697 Myers 2017, 4.

is interested in attempts “*that stage livable futures for both plants and people*”.<sup>698</sup> And she explicitly reminds us that “*we are of the plants; that our futures hinge on creating livable futures with the plants*”,<sup>699</sup> that we must learn to live in a manner that supports vegetal life as well. Gardens show “the various ways that *people stage relations with plants* – whether ... intimate, extractive, violent, or instrumentalizing”,<sup>700</sup> she writes. The same could be said of parks, woods, urban nature and performances in those surroundings as well. My performances with trees are intimate, rather than violent or extractive, but they inevitably also instrumentalize the trees to some extent. Sitting in a tree means using it as a supporting structure, and posing for a camera on a tripod with a tree, without its explicit consent, are both performances that utilize the trees, despite letting them be as and where they are. There is no collaboration – nor manipulation – comparable with gardening taking place.

In her short provocation “Are the Trees Watching Us?” (2020), Myers suggests that plants “have involved themselves in the lives of every other being on the planet”,<sup>701</sup> as they have been “concocting elixirs, poisons, fibres, and all forms of deliciousness, in responsive relation with other plants, animals, insects, microbes, and fungi”.<sup>702</sup> They probably “have a deeper awareness of the world around them than we ever will”,<sup>703</sup> she adds. According to her, “our senses of taste, smell, colour, texture, and form are already all shaped by our involu-tionary becoming alongside plants”.<sup>704</sup> Myers suggests that one way

698 Myers 2017, 3.

699 Ibid.

700 Myers 2017, 1.

701 Myers 2020, n.p.n.

702 Ibid.

703 Ibid.

704 Ibid.

“we can learn to appreciate just how the trees are watching us is to begin to vegetalise our sensoria”, to start “reworking our perceptions with plenty attentions”.<sup>705</sup> She explains that she has developed “hypnagogic inductions, or guided visualisations, that can dilate our morphological imaginaries, altering our sense of our bodily contours, and what we can see, feel, and know”.<sup>706</sup> In her project “Becoming Sensor”,<sup>707</sup> Myers experimented with artistic strategies and emphasized collaboration with and support of indigenous decolonialization efforts. “Art can alter our ideas about what we can see, sense, feel and know. Artmaking can help us recognize how colonial and limited our ways of knowing are,” she notes.<sup>708</sup> Sure, concerning the potentiality of artistic practices, I do agree.

In performing and thinking with trees, I have not explored such sensory expansions, although what one attends to and spends time with necessarily alters one’s perceptions and priorities over time. By becoming still with the trees, I attune myself to their “environment”, at least to some extent, and thereby learn from them how to notice, attend to and appreciate other lifeforms. One need not expect the trees to be watching us nor turn to ancient folk wisdom for help in order to consider a tree one’s teacher. A tree can make a good therapist as well; a better listener would be hard to find.

Plants can serve as teachers in very tangible ways, not only in how they respond to their site and situation but also in their embodiment of a processual way of being. In his remarkable book *Thinking like a Plant* (2018), Craig Holdrege takes up Goethe’s idea of plant metamorphosis and works with plants as pedagogical tools. The titles of the main chapters of his book give an idea of his approach:

705 Myers 2020, n.p.n.

706 Ibid.

707 Evans 2020, n.p.n

708 Ibid.

1) From Object Thinking to Living Thinking 2) Rooted in the World 3) The Plant as Teacher of Transformation 4) The Plant as Teacher of Context 5) The Story of an Organism, and 6) Conclusion: A Quiet Revolution. Based on my experiences performing with trees, the idea of learning about transformation and process, as well as of site and context, from trees makes much sense. As “the plant grows and transforms according to its own inner pattern” it is “adjusting itself at all times to what it takes in from the environment” in a manner that is “dynamic, connected, resilient, and ... always in relation to the world into which it grows”.<sup>709</sup> “Why can’t we be like that?” Holdrege asks and suggests we adopt plants as “our teachers of living thinking”.<sup>710</sup> On the one hand, plants are experts in site-specificity, as noted before; a plant reveals in its body “the environment of which it is a part” in such a way that by observing plants, “we are seeing through them the qualities of the environment”.<sup>711</sup> They can teach us that “life is eminently contextual”.<sup>712</sup> On the other hand, we can learn transformation from plants, understanding the “rhythmic interplay of growth and decay” of “an organism that manifests itself over time” to become aware of life as “unfolding, growing and dying, transformation, dynamism, rhythm, and a unifying stream of creativity that brings forth diversity in an organism”.<sup>713</sup> The trees are in a process of constant transformation, albeit more slowly. Trees can teach us “to establish a dynamic cognitive relation to the world” so that “our thinking becomes more dynamic”.<sup>714</sup> Holdrege summarizes: “The plant shows us how to live in transformation; it shows us context

709 Holdrege 2013, 1

710 Holdrege 2013, 5.

711 Holdrege 2013, 9.

712 Ibid.

713 Holdrege 2013, 7.

714 Holdrege 2013, 8.

sensitivity; it shows us the unique nature of organisms; it shows us how to overcome an object-relation to the world.”<sup>715</sup> Or, to express it more modestly, plants can help us understand and value transformation and context or process and place, if only we regard them as our teachers. And surely there are other qualities or skills we can learn from plants, especially trees, such as patience and perseverance, or how to become still and silent for a moment, or to appreciate how remarkable some beings are, even ones we previously thought unremarkable.

Based on my experiences during these two projects, *Performing with Plants* and *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, I can say that one can enlist trees as teachers in various ways, depending on one’s focus. At the moment of this writing, I am visiting a pine tree in Nobelparken in Stockholm on the days I stay in the city, and my practice is divided into three actions or poses performed for the camera with the pine. First, I practice power, rootedness and grounding by doing the tree pose from Taiji, with bent knees, straight back and arms raised in front of me at shoulder height while facing the pine. Then I practice expansion, stretch and balance by reaching up on my toes towards the sky with the help of the branches of the pine, and finally I rest and receive support and energy by leaning on the pine’s trunk, learning about empathy with “all our relatives” in the world. And as befits a performance-as-research approach, I did not begin by thinking about what I should learn or what the pine tree could teach me. Rather, I began with practicing these poses again and again while considering what those poses and the pine might teach me only later on, thus exploring and learning by doing, first performing with and then thinking with the tree.

715 Holdrege 2013, 10.



Pondering with Pines “logo”

## IV Concluding remarks

To begin this ending, I quote author Amitav Ghosh, who writes:

“This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans. As with all the most important artistic endeavors in human history, this is a task that is at once aesthetic and political – and because of the magnitude of the crises that besets the planet, it is now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency.”<sup>716</sup>

In response to this statement, I have to admit that I am not really telling stories, nor can I claim to have restored agency and voice to nonhumans, whether imaginatively or practically. I do, however, recognize the task and hope these notes and reflections can contribute as signposts in that direction, if nothing else. Rather than try to summarize the descriptions and reflections concerning the two projects that provided material for these pages, *Performing with Plants* (2017–2019) and *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (2020–2021), I conclude by mentioning some openings they have led to and that I have not yet discussed. One such opening

<sup>716</sup> Ghosh 2021, 204.

is the trilingual podcast Talking with Trees – Puhetta puille – Talar med träd,<sup>717</sup> which is a series of attempts to address specific trees in Swedish, Finnish or English, presented as a freestanding sequel to the project Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees. So far, I have published seven podcasts in Finnish and seven in Swedish, based on the soundtracks of videoworks.<sup>718</sup> I have also talked in English with a pine in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki and with a pine in Lill-Jansskogen in Stockholm, and I will continue doing that as part of the new project developed out of the previous ones, namely the likewise trilingual Pondering with Pines – Mietti mäntyjen kanssa – Funderar med furor.<sup>719</sup> As indicated by the title of the project, commenced at the beginning of 2022, my trajectory has been from plants to trees to pines, a narrowing of scope. Whether the trajectory from performing to meeting to pondering also represents a sharpening of focus remains to be seen. That said, the pine family is large and varied and has been around for more than 200 million years...

717 Talking with Trees <https://soundcloud.com/user-90370389>

718 Kuusi hyvä 1-7 [Dear Spruce] <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/844990/0/0> and Tala om det för tallen 1-7 [Tell it to the pine] <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1107375>

719 Pondering with Pines <https://ponderingwithpines.wordpress.com>

## Appendix

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- Lectures and talks related to the topic*
- "Meetings with trees – repetition as a tool in artistic research," online lecture as part of Video and Painting: Parallel Movements, Artistic research into the unstable condition of the image, International lectures, University of Lisbon, 30.11.2021.
- "In the Disappearing Forest," online presentation at a workshop in Saint Etienne 22.10.2021.
- Project presentation as part of a lecture series on ecodramaturgy by Katri Tanskanen at Helsinki University, 15.10.2021.
- "Holding nature: Meetings with Trees," online talk as part of the program related to the exhibition New Nature in St. Petersburg, 22.9.2021.
- "Meetings with Trees in Cities," talk as part of "Nature in the City: Nonhuman Heterotopias" (online), 6–8.8.2021 St. Petersburg.
- "Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees as Artistic Research" 16.6.2021, as part of the International lectures, Faculdade de Belas-Artes Universidade de Lisboa.

- "Monday Lecture: Working with Spruces – On the Strange Individuality of Trees" at the Art Academy, Bergen (online), 26.5.2021.
- "Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees," online talk Knowledge in the Arts #2: Annette Arlander, 30.3.21.
- The Arts Research Africa publication event of Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg and Environs, 18.2.2021.
- Presentation of "Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees" at Kuva Research Club, 15.2.2021.
- "Meetings with Trees" talk at the seminar of KISS, Kolloquium on Kinetics in Sound and Space, Hamburg, 27.1.2021.
- "Authentic trees? – Artistic research, non-human collaborators and the documentary," pre-recorded video presentation at the seminar Research in the Arts. Authenticity, Polymathy and Dissimulation Lissabon: Museo Archeologico, 24.10.2019.
- "The Stockholm Tree Calendar," presentation at Sensing the City – Salon at Coventry University, 4.3.2019.
- "Artistic Research as Situated Practice – Performing with Lichen," video lecture at the conference and book release Research in the Arts – the need for artistic ideas, at Museo Arceologico de Carmo, Lissabon, 27.11.2018.
- "Performing with plants" in the series Frank Professors, Academy of Fine Arts, Exhibition laboratory, 9.10.2018.
- "Performing with Plants as Experiential Challenge," at the open seminar Research in Arts and Experience, Aalto University, 26.3. 2018.
- "Performing with Plants," presentation and screening at the public seminar in Helsinki University Think Corner (Tiedekulma), 14.11.2017.
- "Performing with Plants," presentation and workshop at Transversality in Performance, Doctoral Symposium at the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at University of Gothenburg, 9–10.10.2017.
- "Between Sea and Sky – With a Tree," talk at the seminar *Between Sky and Sea: Tourist*, organized by Performance Art Bergen in Kvalnes, Lofoten, 18.7.2017.

*Conference papers and presentations related to the topic*

- "Kasvidemokratia ja esitys tutkimuksena" [Vegetal democracy and performance as research] at the symposium Theatre and Democracy organized by the Finnish Association for Theatre Research, 17.12.2021.
- "Writing to Your Chosen Tree – a Workshop" and "Writing Letters to Trees with the Trees" at CARPA 7 – Elastic Writing in Artistic Research 25.8. and 27.8.2021 (online).
- "Becoming a Tree – a documented workshop" in IFTR PAR (Performance as Research) Working Group online event 12–16.7.2021.
- "Examples of text on video when writing to trees" in Constellate 2021 P*S*i Artistic Research Working Group online event, 7–9.6.2021.
- Contribution to the fragments of the "lost" SAR conference 2020, published at the SAR



- conference 2021.
- “Day with a Bog Birch – Vegetalising,” presenting the thematic essay in the context of the conference Peripheries in Parallax, 9.4.2021.
- “Dear Spruce – Dear Deceased,” presentation Peripheries in Parallax, Aalto University 22.1.2021.
- “Performing with Plants,” presentation at autumn day of Society for Theatre Research, 4.12.2020.
- “Meetings with trees and the metaphysics of mixture,” at CONTINUITIES in PRACTICE – a virtual exchange organized by Performance-as-Research Working Group (IFTR), 14.7.2020.
- “Writing to Trees with Trees as Performance for Camera,” presentation at the PSI Artistic Research Working Group’s virtual summer meeting 7.7.2020.
- “Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple,” presentation at the Research Week of Stockholm University of the Arts 24.1.2020.
- “Performing with a pine tree,” presentation at Kuva Research Days at Exhibition Laboratory, Helsinki 10.12.2019.
- “Performing with plants,” project presentation at the research seminar of Stockholm University of the Arts 11.12.2019.
- “The Human in Performance?” panel presented with the How to Do Things with Performance at PARSE conference 2019 Human in Gothenburg, 13–15.11.2019.
- “PAR and plants – performing with trees?” in the Performance as Research Working Group at the IFTR conference in Shanghai, 8–12.7.2019.
- “Moving in a Pine” as part of “performance-response-extraction – elasticity of artistic research” by the Artistic Research Working Group at PSI #25 in Calgary, 4–7.7.2019.
- “Performing with plants – for a planthroposcene,” paper and presentation at Art in the Anthropocene Conference in the Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin, 7–9.6.2019.
- “Performing with Pines and Spruces,” paper and presentation at the conference Trees in/and/around Literature in the Anthropocene at Università degli studi di Torino, 21–22.5.2019.
- Presentation at the seminar Working with the Vegetal III, Stockholm University of the Arts, 4.4.2019.
- “Hanging in a pine tree or appearing with plants,” performance lecture/video essay at Performance Philosophy Research Festival and Conference, Intervention! Intoxication? Amsterdam, 14–17.3.2019.
- “Performing with a Pine tree,” participatory presentation in two parts, Stockholm University of the Arts Research Week, 22–25.1.2019.
- “Visiting a Tree,” presentation and installation at Floating Peripheries conference, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, 14–16.1.2019.
- Presentation at the seminar Working with the Vegetal II, Stockholm University of the Arts, 29.11.2018.
- “Rainy Day in Rekdal,” screening and presentation at the symposium Tanz der Dinge/

- Things that dance at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, 5–7.10.2018.
- Presentation at the seminar Working with the Vegetal, Stockholm University of the Arts, 23.5.2018.
- “Puiden kanssa Helsingin puistoissa” [With Trees in the Parks of Helsinki], presentation at the Finnish Urban Studies Conference, Tieteiden talo [House of Sciences], Helsinki, 3–4.5.2018
- “Rainy Day in Rekdal,” presentation at Radical Relevances conference, Aalto University, 25–27.4.2018.
- “Performing with plants – presentation, process, archive,” at the symposium on artistic research, organized by the Swedish Research Council at Stockholm University of the Arts, 28–29.11.2017.
- “Resting with the Pines in Nida,” at the seminar With Plants, at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 27.10.2017.
- “Performing with Plants” installation at Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts, CARPA 5: Perilous Experience? Extending Experience through Artistic Research at University of the Arts Helsinki Theatre Academy, 31.8.2017.
- “Performing with trees?” introduction with screening of *The Tide in Kan Tiang* as part of the workshop organized by How to Do Things with Performance at Sao Paulo Escola del Teatro, 6.7.2017.
- “How to Do things by Performing with Plants” on the panel organized by the research project How to Do Things with Performance at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference Unstable Geographies – Multiple Theatricalities in Sao Paulo, 10–14.7.2017.
- “How to Do Things with Performance – Performing with Plants (First Attempts)” in the Artistic Research Working Group at PSi#23 Overflow (Performance Studies International conference) in Hamburg June 8–11.2017.
- “Performing with Plants” in Plantarium: Re-imagining green futurities, at Linköping University, 1–2.6.2017.
- “Performing with plants,” project presentation at the seminar With Plants at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 3.5.2017.
- “Performing with Plants,” presentation of the project at the brown bag seminar at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 25.4.2017.
- “Performing (with) Lichen as Situated Practice,” paper at 7th Annual Conference on New Materialisms Performing Situated Knowledges: Space, Time, Vulnerability, Warsaw, 21–23.9.2016

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How to collaborate with other beings we share this planet with is a central task for artists today. The starting point for these texts was the realization that we must find ways of relating to the environment that are meaningful from the perspectives of the ecological crisis and a new-materialist and post-humanist understanding of our place in the world. They suggest that artistic research can contribute by allowing for and generating hybrid forms of performing and thinking.

Performing and Thinking with Trees summarises the various strategies of lens-based work used in two artistic research projects by Annette Arlander, namely Performing with Plants (2017–2019) and Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees (2020–2021). The focus of these essays is on artistic practices, enhanced by some philosophical discussions related to vegetal life. They seek to contribute to critical plant studies as well as to demonstrate what the outputs of artistic research beyond doctoral work might look like.

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