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PERFORMING WITH PLANTS – APPEARING WITH ELMS AND ALDER

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“Performing with plants” is an artistic research project, which develops and specifies the question of how to perform landscape today.¹ A new materialist and posthumanist perspective prompt us to rethink the notion of landscape and to consider how the surrounding world consists of creatures, life-forms and material phenomena with varying degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing or activating landscape could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements in a landscape, such as specific trees, and explore what can be done together with them, for instance how to perform for camera together.

1 The doctoral program at the Academy of Fine Arts has been one of the key research environments for discussions on artistic research, and has in recent years hosted postdoctoral and senior artistic research projects as well. “Performing with plants” is an example of such a project by a visiting researcher, conducted at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2017) and Stockholm University of the Arts Research Centre (2018–2019).

Rethinking our relationship to the environment is a central task for artists today. Artistic research can contribute to this through its capacity to allow for and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. This project participates in the discussion by way of a) developing artistic practices and producing art works that can critically question existing conventions and habits in our relationship to the environment and b) by theoretically reflecting, based on practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees. The importance of the project rests ultimately on the importance of the plants themselves – they are producing the preconditions for oxygen-based life on the planet. One basic form of performing with plants is agriculture (Pollan 2002).

In this text I first present the aims and the background of the project briefly, contextualize it within the growing interest in plant thinking (Marder 2013), plant theory (Nealon 2016), and the language of plants (Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017) and link it to new materialist feminist theorizing (Barad 2007), especially the notions of trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010), of becoming-with (Haraway 2016) and *zoe*-centered egalitarianism (Braidotti 2016). Then I look more closely at one part of the project which took place in Helsinki during the year 2017, where I visited a group of elm trees and a partly felled alder in Kaivopuisto Park, posing weekly for a camera on tripod with them. The rough time-lapse videos created of these mundane visits serve as examples of a mixture of artistic concerns related to landscape, performance art, environmental art, photography and moving image. Based on my experiences with these trees, I discuss the problem of performing with plants as an example of the problem of becoming-with, of living with entities and life-forms unlike us that we nevertheless are completely dependent on. I propose that understanding performing with plants as appearing together, in the same image space as well as in the same city, could be a way to practice acknowledging this dependence.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

A longstanding interest in “performing landscape”, which took, for example, the form of a twelve-year project on Harakka Island in Helsinki and a series of video works called *Animal Years* (2003–2014) forms the background to this project that explores performing with plants. Landscape as a notion is highly problematic, widely criticized as colonialist (DeLue & Elkins 2008) and easily associated with an untenable attitude, romanticising “Nature” as “Landscape”, by suggesting “a picture within a frame”, a view looked at from a distance, from a human perspective, an approach in some sense representative of a “profound form of idealism” (Morton 2011, 80). Focusing on a specific aspect of the environment that constitutes a significant part of most landscapes, and actually forms more than 80 % of the biomass of the planet earth (Daley 2018), vegetation, is one way of concretising the idea of landscape. Working with the vegetal is an immensely broad topic, which is here narrowed down by choosing specific trees to visit and perform with. Trees figured prominently in some of the works in *Animal Years*, like in *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007), *Under the Spruce I-III* (2008) or *Year of the Rabbit – With a Juniper* (2012), although the main aim was to document changes taking place in a specific location during a year due to shifting seasons and weather conditions. The same technique – performing repeatedly in the same place for a camera on tripod, keeping the framing of the image as constant as possible – is utilized in these examples of performing with trees, although the time schedule of weekly visits was extended to twice or three times a week, when possible.

As an artistic research project this endeavour differs from current artistic engagements with plants, which tend to be linked to bio art and engage the vegetal in laboratory circumstances, or to focus on making the vegetal processes perceptible for humans, for instance by sonification, like Marcus Maeder’s *Trees: Pinus Silvestris*, or Terike Haapoja’s *Closed Circuit – Open Duration*. Another option is letting the plants perform, as with the upside-down hung trees readjusting their growth in Natalia Jeremijen-

ko's *Tree Logic*, or the trees drawing in Tuula Närhinen's *Windtracers*, or then inviting humans to perform for plants, as in the work by the research group *Dance for Plants*. Performing explicitly "with" plants, as Essi Kausalainen has done in several performances, can be exemplified by Spela Petric's *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis*, a bio art project with links to endurance performance, where the standing artists' shadow is imprinted on a square of growing watercress in a gallery space. Performing with plants in their own environment is undertaken by performers like the aerial dancer Anna Rubio, who suspends herself in trees, and in community art projects like *Standing with the Saguaro*, where members of the public were invited to share their experiences of standing with a saguaro cactus in a national park in Arizona. For more examples and a discussion of vegetal performativity, especially with regard to affect and touch, see Nicolic & Radulovic (2018).

GROWING INTEREST IN PLANTS

The growing interest in plant studies in recent years, to some extent as a further development of the burgeoning of animal studies (Derrida 2002; Haraway 2008) and post-humanist thinking (Wolfe 2009; Braidotti 2013), has focused on plant rights (Hall 2011), plant thinking (Marder 2013), plant theory (Nealon 2016), the language of plants (Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017) and more.

In *Plants as Persons, a Philosophical Botany* Matthew Hall (2011) analyses philosophical and religious writings from various traditions. He notes "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" (Hall 2011, 157). Hall asks how we could move "from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care" and even incorporate plants "into dialogical relationships" (Hall 2011, 156)? These questions are relevant for any attempts at performing with plants. Hall propagates an understanding of plants

as "active, self-directed, even intelligent Beings" and suggests that the "recognition of plants as persons", emphasizes "the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives" (Hall 2011, 169). Moreover, he notes 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" (ibid.). Although compelling, this kind of extended individualism is not compatible with continental plant philosophy, nor with new materialist feminist thought.

In contrast to this idea of extending individuality and personhood to plants the contemporary philosopher perhaps best known for his engagement with the vegetal, Michael Marder, challenges humans to learn from the dispersed life of plants and to recognize planthood in themselves. In his study *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Marder offers a critique of the Western legacy of plant neglect by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics. He stresses the importance of understanding vegetal life for our attempts at avoiding metaphysical dualism and understanding what it means to "live with" other beings. Marder tries to formulate a post-metaphysical way of thinking by focusing on "the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought" (Marder 2013, 152). For him "the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with" (ibid., 51). In his opinion "all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and ... neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible" (ibid.).

An inherent divisibility and participation are paramount in the life of plants; "the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an onto-political effect of plant-soul" which must "eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority". 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'". (ibid., 53.) Responding

to Deleuze and Guattari's injunction "Follow the plants!" Marder wants us to engage in irreverent plant-thinking, on the path of becoming-plant. Thinking for him is not the sole privilege of the human subject, and therefore he introduces the notion *it thinks*, an impersonal, non-subjective, and non-anthropomorphic agency (ibid., 165.). The vegetal *it thinks*, for instance a tree that thinks, refers to an undecided subject, like in the expression 'it rains'. *It thinks* is not concerned with "who or what does the thinking?" but "when and where does thinking happen?" Marder explains, because it arises from and returns to the plant's embeddedness in the environment. All radically contextual thought is an inheritor of vegetal life, he adds. (ibid., 169.)² It is perhaps through this embeddedness and contextuality, rather than personhood or a general individualism, that something of the specificity of certain trees or other plants can be acknowledged and appreciated.

With regard to biopolitics and animal studies Jeffrey Nealon suggests in *Plant Theory – Bio Power and Vegetable Life* (2016) "that 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 'life' beyond the human" (Nealon 2016, xv). 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" (ibid., 106). There are, however, basic commonalities shared by animals and plants, like breathing, a topic I have explored elsewhere (Arlander 2018). Nealon 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", pri-

² For a discussion of some of Marder's ideas, see "Working with a Witches' Broom" (Arlander 2015).

marily defined "by the practices of emergence and transformation" (ibid., 106–107). To emphasize the practical relevance of debates in biopolitics he refers to current seed leasing practices: "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." The question is not so much what humans should do now, he adds, "but as Foucault suggests, [...] to pay closer attention to what our doing does" (ibid., 113).

Undoubtedly, it would be a good idea to take a closer look at what my way of performing with plants is doing, to the plants, to the human performer, to the viewer of the resulting video work and to others around. Merely calling my practice "sitting in trees" creates associations to heroic activist projects and risky environmental struggles (see for instance Philp 2018) that this modest practice has very little in common with. So far, I have tried to proceed in a manner with the least possible consequences for the trees involved. Looking at the path formed in the grass leading from the camera tripod to the trunk, however, I realize there is no way of *not* having an impact.

In the introduction to *The Language of Plants – Science, Philosophy, Literature*, the editors (Gagliano, Ryan and Viveira, 2017) note that despite the seeming impossibility to understand plants – and the different discourses of science, philosophy and literature, included in the anthology, I would like to add – "we should continue trying to listen what plants tell us in their own modes of expression" (Gagliano et al 2017, xviii). In an article titled "Breaking the Silence – Green Mudras and the Faculty of Language in Plants" plant scientist Monica Gagliano tries to bridge "the gap between the human and nonhuman world" on the one hand by "showing that [...] human language is [...] by virtue of its very 'materiality', closer than we think to the language of nonhuman others", and on the other hand "by showing the greater complexity of nonhuman communication", bringing "nature closer to the human world, via, ultimately, the medium of a more univer-

sal understanding of language” (Gagliano 2017, 86). She further asserts that by “treating language as a real and perceivable feature of the whole organism-environment system [...] we are able to consider language as a meaning-making *activity* at the core of every form of life, whether human or not.” (ibid., 87) In her concluding remarks she interestingly suggests that human language is partly to blame for our disconnectedness. As the symbols we use are detached from and only arbitrarily related to what they symbolize, the idea of humans as detached from and dominating other forms of life “is incarnated within the medium of communication itself.” Thus, “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.” (ibid., 96.)

Concerning communication with the trees, in my performing with plants I am not attempting to communicate with them, to enter into a dialogue, 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 trees, or on tree stumps, as in this case, I try to explore how a “being with” or “becoming with”, beyond language could visually take place.

SOME MATERIALIST FEMINIST NOTIONS

Some notions developed by new materialist feminist theorists are useful in articulating this “becoming with”. It is not to be conflated with “becoming plant” as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, which according to Karen Houle is an under thought concept in Deleuzian studies. She describes this as simply one kind of becoming, a “provisional co-creative zone in which the ‘parties’ and their ‘proper functions’ are themselves effaced and augmented”, in this case meaning “the emission of particles from a heterogeneous alliance we make which expresses in action the unique qualities of plants or plant-lives” (Houle 2011, 96–97). The notion of becoming plant could be worth examining, but is not my concern here. Instead of the no-

tion intra-action, a key concept developed by Karen Barad (2007),³ I will briefly present the notions sympoiesis (Haraway 2016) and trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010), as well as *zoe* (Braidotti 2017), which could be useful in thinking with plants.

Sympoiesis is a term used by Donna J. Haraway to emphasize various forms of relationality in action. She writes: “Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means ‘making with’. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. ... earthlings are *never alone*.” For her “[s]ympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company”. In this sense I am making images in company with the trees, with the camera, the tripod, the passers-by and others.

Haraway is critical of the so-called posthuman turn, although she seems very much part of it: “We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a posthumanist” she playfully writes. She speaks of a “sensual molecular curiosity”, “insatiable hunger” or an “irresistible attraction toward enfolding each other”, which function as “the vital motor of living and dying on earth”, and for the forming of “sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages” (Haraway 2016, 58.)

Perhaps it is within such curiosity that we could understand our attraction to trees, or a more or less unconscious understanding of our dependence on them, for oxygen, food, or “energy”. But what would be our contribution to the trees, besides potentially spreading their seeds? From my perspective our relationship seems rather one-way, even parasitic. The tree stump serves as a sculpture pedestal for the human being, although the body could also be seen as a visual extension, a kind of prosthesis to

³ Elsewhere I have explored the ideas of intra-action and agential cut developed by Karen Barad (see Arlander 2018; 2014).

the stump. Haraway reminds us that “we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations [...] We become-with each other or not at all.” (ibid., 4) Moreover, she stresses how such “material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplacé, entangled and worldly” (ibid.). This observation is particularly pertinent when working with vegetation in their context rather than as biomass. The trees I visit grow someplace and not noplacé.

Trans-corporeality is another concept to help us realize our interconnectedness and situatedness, coined by feminist and environmental scholar Stacy Alaimo. Trans-corporeality stresses “movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature”, and the need for “complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual” (Alaimo 2010, 3). Alaimo understands “human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and stresses the fact that “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (ibid., 2). Trans-corporeality emphasizes “movement across bodies”, “reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” and “acknowledges the often unpredictable or unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (ibid.). Stressing “the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world” enables “ethical and political positions that can contend with [...] contemporary] realities in which ‘human’ and ‘environment’ can by no means be considered as separate” (ibid.). Moreover, “to cultivate a tangible sense of connection to the material world” is a way to counteract “the pervasive sense of disconnection that casts ‘environmental issues’ as containable, eccentric, dismissible topics.” (ibid., 16).

Regardless of the lack of a shared language between the trees and me, there is nevertheless an ongoing trans-corporeality, a chemical and physical exchange between us. Even though a direct form of communication

is difficult for humans to access, at least without some technological help, trans-corporeality highlights the fact that we share and communicate on a chemical and physical level all the time. Some of the substances harmful for humans could be so for the trees as well, and vice versa. At the moment of writing this a prolonged drought makes the suffering of the trees palpable and our trans-corporeality immediately understandable.

We could also articulate our communality with plants as a “*zoe*-centred egalitarianism.” Based “on a monistic ontology drawn from neo-Spinozist vital materialist philosophy”, Rosi Braidotti posits *zoe* (rather than *bios*) as a ruling principle, as the “dynamic, self-organizing structure of life” which “stands for generative vitality”, a “transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains”. She proposes “*zoe*-centered egalitarianism” as “a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic transspecies commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism”. (Braidotti 2017, 32.) Without the need to assume any specific form of communion or energetic contact between the trees and myself, nor to disregard the very real differences between our ways of living, I can nevertheless be aware of our common partaking in *zoe*, a generative vitality we share.

A GROUP OF ELM TREES AND AN ALDER

During the year 2017 I had the opportunity to spend time performing with plants as an artistic research fellow at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and chose to visit an alder tree and a group of elm trees in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki. I also visited a beech and a sycamore in Stockholm, less regularly, and created a Tree Calendar in the Helsinki area. Here I will use the elms and the alder in Kaivopuisto as examples. Beginning on January 10th 2017 I chose a group of elm trees (without knowing they were elm trees) on the hill by the sea in Kaivopuisto Park after searching for suitable alternatives in various parks, mainly because they provided a comfortable place to sit. On the way back, I noticed an alder with one

trunk cut off and had an impulse to sit on the stump, as a strange act of mourning. I did that, beginning on January 12th 2017 and then continued with it regularly on my way to or from the elm trees. The two different framings with the elms, one closer, one further away (see images 1 and 2), which were made as alternatives to choose between, were both repeated on all the visits throughout the year. The last visit to the trees took place at sunset on December 17th 2017. All the one hundred visits (the number was a coincidence) were recorded on video and documented by video stills on the Research Catalogue (see links to works discussed) as well as described in blog posts linked to them.

The recorded video material is edited into several video works. The full-length versions *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1 and 2 (Spring)* as well as *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1 and 2 (Autumn)* (see images 1, 2, 3 and 4) were edited for presentation purposes into a shorter two-channel installation *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1 and 2* (1 h 40 min. 10 s) with one-minute images of each session. In a similar manner the full-length versions *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Spring)* and *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Autumn)* (see images 5 and 6) were edited into a shorter version of one-minute images, *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto* (1 h 40 min 10 sec).



Image 1. *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1 (Spring)*



Image 2. *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 2 (Spring)*



Image 3. *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 1 (Autumn)*



Image 4. *With Elms in Kaivopuisto 2 (Autumn)*



Image 5. *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Spring)*



Image 6. *With an Alder in Kaivopuisto (Autumn)*

Looking at the videos now, in retrospect, it seems obvious that the framing of the images is made with the human figure in mind; more distance would have been needed to provide proper images of the trees. The scale of the tree is not easy to adopt, as the portrait of a spruce, *Horizontal*, by Eija-Liisa Ahtila convincingly demonstrates. The videos are documentations of performances in some sense, and thus representations, although I tend to understand performance here as a way of producing the images. The relationship of representation and performativity has a long history within discourses on performance art and also artistic research, from Peggy Phelan's famous statement that performances cannot be documented (Phelan 1993, 146) – if they are, they turn into representations, something else than performance – to Barbara Bolt's remark that artworks are performative, or have performative force, because they do things in the world (Bolt 2016, 130). Karen Barad's search for performative alternatives to representationalism which "shifts the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality [...] to matters of practices/ doings/ actions" is especially relevant for these works (Barad 2003, 802). The videos can be read as representations, and discussed as such (how justly are the trees represented, for instance), but also as the results of processes, of repeatedly recording variations, emphasizing their performativity. Following Barad we can focus on the material-discursive practices involved. Among them one observation is the importance of the light in changing the atmosphere of the images, which is no news for those working with lens-based practices. Moreover, the irritating shifts in the framing especially in the mid-shot version, due to the shifting placement of the tripod, result from technical carelessness, and serve as a reminder to use reliable marks for the tripod.

PERFORMING AS APPEARING

When trying to articulate in what manner such repeated visits to trees and the resulting videos could be understood as performance, I thought of the Finnish word 'esiintyä', which is a reflexive form of 'esittää', to perform, pres-

ent or represent, that is to perform (as) oneself, or to appear, even occur. In Finnish the word does not necessarily have the philosophical connotation of appearance as opposed to truth or reality, but is concerned with being visible, at the front ('esillä'), on display. Thus, the word describes rather well what we are doing, the tree stumps and me.

This idea of occurring or appearing with plants resonates with the approach suggested by Michael Marder, when he writes, in "To Hear Plants Speak" (Marder, in Gagliano et al. 2017) that "plants articulate in their language devoid of words ... [f]irst of all, themselves... they reaffirm vegetal being, which, through them, becomes more spatially pervasive" (Marder 2017, 120). According to him "plants articulate themselves with themselves" but they also "articulate the burgeoning emergence, or self-generated appearance, that distinguishes the Greek conception of nature or *phusis*". For Marder plants are the "living bridges between the elements" and the "connections they forge are nothing short of the language of life itself" (ibid.). Moreover, "plants stand for the principle of a material living expression as such, demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself" (ibid., 122). 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 them? Marder further claims that the plants form a world. "The world is what happens in between. To insist [...] that plants form a world is simply to emphasize that they institute relations of lived and living significance between things" (ibid.). And that kind of "worlding", (to use the term of Haraway), of relations of significance between things presumably takes place in this case between the trees and the human performer as well.

In "What the Vegetal World Says to Us" (in Gagliano et al. 2017) Luce Irigaray connects plants with doing, and with performative language, referring to J. L. Austin and John R. Searle: "In a way, for the vegetal world, saying is doing or acting", although "endowed with a meaning that is closer to being than to merely embodying an intention" (Irigaray 2017, 130). Being as doing is relevant for some forms of performance art,

especially “non-performances” like the ones discussed here, where the action is a “non-action”, at least compared to spectacular ordeals. When thinking of plants performing the question of intention is relevant. Using the word performing we assume an intentional act, while appearing need not be intentional in a similar manner. Probably not everybody would agree that plants perform, but there is no doubt that they appear. The interesting question is, can humans appear with them?

Timothy Morton discusses the power of appearance, in “What vegetables are saying about themselves”, stressing that “in some strange but not totally figurative sense, flowers *do* communicate” and “tell us something about the capacities of appearance”, which is ... an active causal power” (Morton 2017, 188). For Morton the “power of appearance has nothing to do with how it is used toward some aim”, for him it is “not activated by a human or even by something we consider sentient – or ... alive.” (ibid.) Rather, for him “[t]he power of appearance resides *within itself*, operating in the form of a loop.” He notes how our relationship to plants is characterized by “an anthropocentric restriction of meaning, intelligence, and agency to the human” and by “anxiety about the loop-like intertwining of being and appearance at levels of being we still consider ‘below’ us.” Actually, “what we consider to be agency, intelligence, sentience, or consciousness” are all related to “processes that happen all by themselves,” he writes. (ibid., 188.) Morton’s focus on appearance is related to his take on object-oriented ontology, which is not easily compatible with the relational ontology of new materialist feminist thinking explored in this text. His idea of appearance is nevertheless interesting if considered with the dispersed life of plants in mind.

The fact that we appear together in the same image, the elms and I as well as the alder and I – something that could be accomplished by digital manipulation as well – that we share the same image space, is accentuated by editing. The human figure is transformed into a sessile being at least in appearance, by cutting out the movement in entering and exiting the image. The framing, however, undermines this effect, because it is done with

the scale of the human being in mind, with the trees in the role of backdrop and support. Although the foliage of the elm trees covers the human figure at times in the mid-shot version, the framing shows only a small portion of the trees, which extend far outside the frame. This typical “mistake” gives the human figure the central position in the image.

In Barad’s terms, we could think of the framing enacting an agential cut, of sorts. “All bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity, its performativity”, she writes. “Boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted through the intra-activity of mattering”. (Barad 2012, 69.) The camera produces an image by creating a split between what is within and what is outside the frame; nothing of this division pre-exists in the landscape. The image emerges through the act of video recording, with all the material-discursive practices involved, such as framing an image and cutting it out of the surroundings, and deciding a time continuum with beginning and end, a slice of time in the life of the tree, for instance. And by this kind of ‘agential cut’ (Barad 2007) that designates what is spatially and temporally included in the video and what is excluded from mattering, a specific performance is extracted from the general performance that is going on in the world. This cut, however, is not to be confused with a human decision; it is the result of intra-actions between equipment and environment, and involves material-discursive practices, like the properties of the lens of the camera, or my preconceptions of what constitutes a good image, or the power of the wind that day, and so on. According Barad “[i]ntra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., a set of material practices) that effects an *agential cut* between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted). That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy.” (ibid., 139–140) Moreover, “[s]ince different agential cuts materialize different phenomena – different marks on bodies – our intra-actions [...] contribute to the differential mattering of the

world” (ibid., 178). For Barad discourse is not a synonym for language, and meaning or intelligibility are not human-based notions. “Discursive practices are the material conditions for making meaning [...] [and] meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (ibid., 335). Thus, in her agential realist account, trees are not excluded from performing or meaning making.

Therefore, regardless of how much of the tree’s body and of my body is included within the image-space, I propose this sitting in, on, with, or by the trees, this performing or appearing together, as a first step toward acknowledging our co-dependence, our trans-corporeality, our participation in *zoe* and in the “ongoing performance of the world”. To what extent this appearing together and visually sharing the same image space could contribute to an understanding of our sharing the same city space, the same urban environment on a practical level is another matter.

PLANTS AS ARTISTS

Instead of a conclusion, or an attempt at a response to the tasks mentioned in the beginning – a) developing artistic practices that can critically question existing conventions and habits in our relationship to the environment and b) theoretically reflecting, based on practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees – some remarks on plants as artists might be appropriate to end with. 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”. (Marder 2018, no page numbers.) This also makes them special and perhaps extraordinary, but not necessarily individual. Based on these remarks my performing or appearing with these elms and alder trees in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki in 2017 could be under-

stood as an artistic collaboration with them. And more generally, inviting the viewer, too, somewhere else at another moment in time, to enter a time and space at least slightly closer to that of vegetal beings, if only in imagery or imagination, could be understood as a suggestion to engage in their mode of self-creation and self-recreation.

LINKS TO WORKS DISCUSSED:

Documentation of performances for camera in Helsinki (2017), video stills

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325189>

With Elms in Kaivopuisto Park

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476426>

With an Alder in Kaivopuisto Park

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=476425>

Documentation of performances for camera in Stockholm (2017), video stills

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/325188>

The Tree calendar (2017)

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/327809>

Links to artworks mentioned (not in references):

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