

PAR and Plants – Performing with Trees?

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This proposal for a media enhanced paper, contributing to a performance conversation, discusses some parts of the artistic research project, 'Performing with plants'. The project combines experiences of a previous project 'Performing landscape' with a contemporary posthumanist and new materialist sensibility. The works I am describing and relating to recent discussions on plants and art (Gibson 2018, Aoi 2018) are performances for camera with two spruce stumps and two pine trees in the centre of Stockholm during the year of the dog 2018 (February 2018 to February 2019). Some of the key questions touched at are a) how to perform 'with' plants, and b) what are the implications of understanding plants as performing, for performance art and for PAR?

The paper will contribute to the discussion of PAR and the 'transdisciplinaryization' of knowledge, through its connections to critical plant studies, while focus on artistic work places it within the Nordic strand of PAR, and thus in the discourse on geographical-methodological legacies. Although not dealing with decolonisation directly, debates within posthumanities (i.e. Braidotti 2013, 2017), and the possibility of an 'ethico-onto-epistemology' (Barad 2007) referred to in the paper have consequences for the decolonisation of the academy.

For 'Performing with plants', see <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>

For the works discussed here, see

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410491/0/0>

I hope to add the edited version of 'Sitting in the pine' in a few days, meanwhile, here is a link to a video made with the other pine: <https://vimeo.com/319487015>



The following text is a compilation of unpublished and published text material, to serve as a starting point.

A post-humanist perspective prompts us to realize that the landscape or environment consists of life forms and phenomena with differing degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements, like singular trees, and explore what to do together with them. In an artistic research project “Performing with plants” at the Stockholm University of the Arts Research Centre I have visited two spruce stumps and two pine trees in Lill-jansskogen, a wood near the city center, regularly during the year 2018. Posing with them repeatedly for a video camera on tripod, I have explored what it could mean to perform with trees, trying to respect their sense of place and time. This work could be contextualized within the current interest in critical plant studies and “art’s return to vegetal life” (Gibson 2018; Aloï 2018).

Rethinking our relationship to the environment 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. 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.

The most important questions explored by the project are: 1) How to collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants (trees and shrubs)? 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 and join in? An overarching research problem is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the current posthumanist and new materialist understanding of the environment? Or perhaps we should write ‘environment’ (Alaimo 2010), since the idea of a separable environment is actually part of the problem to be addressed. To designate certain parts of existence to serve as environment to humans is no longer automatically acceptable.

Many artists are aware of this dilemma and try to move beyond visual representation of landscape or vegetation; living plants are present in much contemporary art. Three examples involving coniferous trees, can serve to exemplify various approaches: Agnes Denes’ *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule* (1996) in Ylöjärvi, Finland, with 11000 planted pine trees, is an early example of a large-scale environmental rehabilitation project. Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video portrait of a single Spruce, *Horizontal* (2011), shows how our representational system is built to depict humans, and Marcus Maerder’s sonification of biological processes in *Trees: Pinus Sylvestris* (Maeder 2016) translates the suffering of a tree for human ears. And historically speaking there is no lack of artistic engagement with plants, from vegetally inspired ornamentation on textiles, pottery and architecture to paintings, poems and science

fiction stories of plants. Living plants are used as material in practices as divergent as garden design, floral arrangements and contemporary bio art.

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 the above-mentioned work by Marcus Maeder's 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 Jeremijenko'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: Skotopoesis*, 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 is hanging 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. More examples and a discussion of vegetal performativity, especially with regard to affect and touch, are discussed by Nicolic & Radulovic (2018).

Rather than working with vegetal growth as material in the tradition of bio art or making biological processes understandable for humans with the help of technology, this project explores everyday forms of embodied action, performing for camera together with trees in the places where they grow. The project can be positioned at the intersection of performance art, media art (or video art, if we can speak of that today) and environmental art, 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 as well as environmental art's sensitivity to the possible effects and side effects an artwork can have.

A broader context for the project is the growing interest in plant studies, 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). Discussions have focused on plant rights (Hall 2011), plant philosophy or plant thinking (Marder 2013; Marder 2015; Marder and Irigaray 2016; Irigaray 2017), plant theory (Nealon 2016), the language of plants (Kranz, Schwan, Wittrock 2016; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017) and queer plants (Sandilands 2017). There is a current "plant turn" (Myers 2017) in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, with an abundance of popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence and communication (Chamovitz 2017; Mancuso & Viola 2015, Wohlleben 2016). An emerging field of critical plant studies (Gibson & Brits 2018) can be linked to 'art's return to vegetal life' (Gibson 2018) and to looking at plants in art (*Antennae* 2011; Aloï 2018). Discussions on plants and performance, however, are mostly linked to

ecology in broader terms¹, with some exceptions like an interest in “vegetalized performance” (Nicolíć & Radulovic 2018), and some attempts at performing with trees, junipers, pines or thistles. (Arlander 2010; 2015; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a) There is no issue of *Performance Research* “On Plants”, or “On Vegetation”, yet, compared to the issues of the journal *Antennae* (2011) devoted to plants and art. One basic form of performing with plants is of course agriculture (Pollan 2002). And why not forestry, too.

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The performances discussed here took place during the year 2018, the Chinese year of the dog, that is, between 16 February 2018 and 3 February 2019, in Lill-Jansskogen or Little Jan’s Wood in the centre of Stockholm, between the campuses of the Royal Institute of Technology and Stockholm University. Four sites were visited repeatedly, two spruce stumps and two pine trees, sometimes three times a week. The performances were recorded by a video camera on tripod to be edited into rough time-lapse videos. Removing the entering and the exiting from the image creates an impression of a continuous action or pose. The fourth of these performances is going to be analysed here, namely, sitting in the small pine, while encounters with the larger pine tree has been discussed elsewhere. (Arlander 2019b). In all these performances I was wearing a pale pink woollen scarf and mostly turning my back to the camera.

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, I try to explore how a “being with” or “becoming with”, beyond language could visually take place.

These repeated visits could be analysed as performances on several levels: in terms of repetition as a mode of performing, in terms of site-specific performances for occasional passers-by in urban space, in terms of posing for the camera as a silent witness and placeholder for future viewers, or in terms of appearing with plants in a more general sense. While individual poses form surprise performances for the passers-by, repeated visits form a recurring and therefore recognizable performance for the frequent users of the area. Moreover, they have performative power while functioning as a habit-forming activity for the performer. The video recording serves as a selective documentation of the live event or, as a mode of gathering and preparing material for the videos as performance. The activity of editing is a performance as well, albeit not publicly displayed as one. Presenting the edited video in various contexts and circumstances as well as online are performances in their own right. The weekly documentation of the process with still images and blogposts on the project website online could be called an artistic research performance. And finally, writing an account of the process and the videos here forms an academic performance as well. In this context our main focus is the performance on the level of the video images, however. Posing

¹ For example, *Performing Ethos*, Volume 5 (2014) or *Performance Research: On Ecology* (2012).

for the camera together with or in a tree is a way of appearing together, not only in the woods but in the image space.

What does performing with plants mean in terms of performance? As I have suggested elsewhere (Arlander 2019) it might be useful to think of appearing rather than performing. The act of performing for camera is relatively easy to understand as a performance; the camera takes the role of the witness or the audience: when the camera is on, the performance begins, and when it is off, the performance ends. This kind of limited understanding of performance excludes, however, other types of performances that emphasize action and process rather than the role of the witness. Following physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad, for example, performances take place everywhere all the time. For her, 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' (Barad 2007, 335). Thus, plants, too, are participating in this ongoing performance of the world. Therefore, there seems to be at least two kinds of performances in my example of performing with trees, the general performance going on in the world, including the plants, and the specific performance extracted out of it by the camera. The act of video recording means framing an image and cutting it out of the surroundings, and deciding a time continuum with beginning and end, for instance a period of time in the life of the tree. Each cut is the result of intra-actions of the apparatus in question, the environmental circumstances and various material-discursive practices, including compositional choices. And by these agential cuts (Barad 2007, 139) that designate 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.

Can I really say that a tree is performing with me? Although understanding the relationship between performer and environment from a posthumanist and new-materialist perspective prompts us to consider how to perform together with life forms and phenomena around us, including plants, this might seem counter-intuitive at first. Elsewhere I have examined the implications of this 'performing with' (Arlander 2018a). When sitting in a pine, performing together with a pine tree, posing for camera together, I am actually using the tree as my performing partner, without its consent, rather than trying to make myself understandable to the tree or to understand the tree's wishes or needs. How can I say that I am performing with a tree, that we are performing together? We are sharing the same image space, however, much as we were sharing the space in the same wood or park. We are appearing or occurring together.

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? In Finnish two words are used for performing, the transitive form '*esittää*', which is used when you perform something, and the intransitive '*esiintyä*', when you are performing yourself in the sense of appearing, of being on display. In Finnish, the word for 'appear' does not necessarily have the philosophical connotation of appearance as opposed to truth or reality, but is concerned with being visible,

in the front (*esillä*). Both words for performing have a whole spectrum of other meanings, but their difference is perhaps clarified by a musician who exclaimed: ‘Unfortunately, you cannot perform (*esittää*) music without performing (*esiintyä*)’, meaning that you cannot play the music piece for an audience without being on display. Perhaps this distinction between the two modes of performing, ‘the showing doing’ and the ‘showing oneself’ or ‘being shown’—appearing—can help us see how the pine trees perform.

The idea of occurring or appearing with plants actually resonates with the approach suggested by philosopher Michael Marder 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’ thus ‘demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself’ (Marder 2017, 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 the trees?

We could also think of plants as artists. According 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). And this also makes them special and extraordinary, to learn from. Perhaps my performing or appearing in the pine tree in Lill-Jan’s Wood in Stockholm in 2018 could be understood as an artistic collaboration with the tree. And more generally, as an attempt at 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, as a suggestion to engage in their mode of self-creation and self-recreation.

But what are the implications of such an understanding plants as our co-performers for performance art and for PAR? This is the topic that I would like to discuss further with you...

Links to artworks mentioned (not in references):

Ahtila, Eija-Liisa: *Horizontal* http://crystaleye.fi/eija-liisa_ahtila/installations/horizontal

Dance for Plants research collective <http://www.danceforplants.com>

Eisele, Kimi & Borderlands Theater: *Standing with the Saguars*

<https://standingwithsaguars.org>

Haapoja, Terike: *Closed Circuit – Open Duration* <http://www.terikehaapoja.net/closed-circuit-open-duration-2008/>

Jeremijenko, Natalie: *Tree Logic* <https://massmoca.org/event/natalie-jeremijenko/>

Kausalainen, Essi <http://www.essikausalainen.com>
Närhinen, Tuula: *Windtracers* <http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/wind.htm>
Petric, Spela: *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis* <http://www.spelapetric.org>
Roussel, Mathilde: *Lives of Grass* <https://anti-utopias.com/art/mathilde-roussel-lives-of-grass/>
Rubio, Anna: http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/anna_rubio_all_the_trees_i_met

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