

Queering ecologies to cultivate unity

Be-coming-Tree entangled live artists with barefoot technology to cultivate global togetherness during pandemic. Queering notions of performance, artists across 6 continents simultaneously engaged with trees, streaming their actions via a shared Zoom screen. The hive-like image mirrored rhizomatic networks challenging anthropocentric notions of separateness. International audiences witnessed diverse ecosystems and engagements with the theme: *Be-coming Tree*. The three female/queer artist-facilitators of the project organised three online roundtables in which participating *Be-coming Tree* artists critically reflected upon the contemporary relevance of the project in terms of: personal art practices, eco-feminist and queering discourses, the dichotomy of ‘human’ and ‘nature’.

text and images: **Jatun Risba, Daniele J Minns, O.Pen Be**

The art initiative *Be-coming-Tree* entangled international live artists with bare-foot technology to cultivate global togetherness during the restrictive months of the pandemic. Artists from Europe, South & North America, Oceania, Africa, and Asia simultaneously engaged with a local tree or woodland for one hour, streaming their action via Zoom to the same shared screen, witnessed by international audiences, giving many a rare glimpse of nature during a period of isolation. The screen offered windows into diverse ecosystems and myriad ways of engaging with the theme: *Be-coming Tree*. Audiences across the four seasonal events (2020-21) gained agency in supporting reforestation by tree-planting embedded in ticket sales.

Since March 2021 the project has been hibernating, giving space to the initiators to embark on personal journeys of transformation, letting the project compost organically and see what remains of it as time passes and the world and its inhabitants change or stay locked in their echo chambers.

The three female/queer artist-facilitators of the project: Jatun Risba (Slovenia), Daniele J Minns (Scotland), and O.Pen Be (England) organised three one-hour long online roundtable discussions with participating *Be-coming Tree* artists. For the purpose of this article, the three transcripts have been edited to focus on *Be-coming Tree*’s current relevance in terms of personal art practices, eco-feminist and queering discourses, and the modernist dichotomy of ‘human’ and ‘nature’.

Roundtable 1

With: Dimple B. Shah (India), Miranda Whall (Wales), Andile Hamilton & Nhlanhla Dhlamini (South Africa)

Jatun Risba: *Be-coming Tree* was the result of my return to Slovenia from London because of the pandemic, and then spending a substantial amount of time by myself, walking in the woods in order to heal and recover from the relocation stress I was dealing with: I was also in a period of grieving. I found this time in the woods very healing so I wanted to offer this to others who might be dealing with similar difficulties, and just to collectivise, to expand let’s say, the experience of recovery to as many people as possible. And also, the fact that in a forest, there is a plurality of different plants and animals, who cohabit in peace and mutuality with each other. This set the base of the whole methodology, of the framework in which we decided to work. In a forest, there is no tree or plant that is considered ugly or inappropriate. Everybody has a place to be, and everybody is accepted, and is part of this ecosystem.



Jatun Risba

Be-coming Tree in Spring, photograph, 2020 © Jatun Risba

Andile Hamilton: I was drawn to *Be-coming Tree* in terms of giving back to nature as artists, and how to reconnect to nature, not only as artists but also as human beings. I interpret my work in connection to nature: trees, rivers, and life below water, by telling different stories and narratives from an artistic perspective, aiming to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Miranda Whall: I think I came across *Be-coming Tree* through the *Performance Magazine Live* Facebook Page. And I sat and watched it online. I was blown away by it. I don't think I'd seen anything quite like it, and I just thought I was gonna give that a go and crawl with a tree on my back. So that's the first one I did. I'm really embarrassed about the tree now because it was a very small sapling oak from my friend's garden, it was all I could find in the pandemic. But two years have gone by, and the tree-crawling projects have become a massive part of my practice. So I'm eternally grateful to *Be-coming Tree*. I'm a practitioner, and academic, working in the realm of multi-species studies, really interested in how we can work with the non-human and for the non-human and massively, urgently needing to change the way that we operate. And I believe art is a powerful means within that wider discussion and wider crisis.

Dimple B. Shah: I also came across the project in *Performance Magazine Live*. It was amazing to see Jatun's bare body on a tree, and that struck me a lot. I never do nude performances. For me it was such a strong image, I like the way it became one body. You know, how the body and the tree become one, and that was quite amazing to see. And I really wanted to be part of it, and that was the time when we were doing collective work online. And it also gave me a platform to reach out to all of you guys to learn more from you about people who are working with plants, and working with nature.

(...) The tribes here (in India) worship the plants as their own god. But still, at the materialistic level, we cut trees. So it is a contrast, but we have to work towards balancing the ecology. And, saving the trees, there are a lot of ecofeminist projects which have been done earlier in India, although I had not known when I hugged the tree for the first time way back in 2000. But later on, you know, through my research, I came across the *Chipko* movement which is about tree-hugging. It was done by local women, and village women, to protect the trees, and save the forest. So these are the moments that impact your thinking, and your consciousness, and also as an artist, you connect to nature on a very different level than people conventionally do.

Nhlanhla Dhlamini: So as eco-artists, as experimental artists, we've been doing environmental studies but didn't know that it could incorporate visual culture, like in *Be-coming Tree*. This initiative and what it represented during Covid, we were like... Wow, why not participate in this? And we're the only African participants. We had the Continent on our back so we had to represent! I felt that *Be-coming Tree* was an artistic ceremonial ritual, it was psychometric, and it was healing even for us. We were going through certain personal things and to be part of *Be-coming Tree* was life-changing to a certain extent. Because when you think about it, the eco crisis right? It affects the global South and the people who are displaced. They can't participate in environmental studies and environmental awareness because we're suffering from economic difficulties. Taking part in environmental awareness, at a grass-roots level is important. Because when you remember anti-apartheid, there was art involved, right? AIDS activism, there was art involved. So in this environmental crisis, you also need eco-art on a global grass-roots level, and we were actually like, let's take this to global-local level. Why not teach kids about trees, environmental stuff, and the arts? We're creating a new niche, a new way of changing the world.

AH: And how do we disseminate such information at the grassroots level? How to expose the different sectors in terms of disseminating, and advocating for eco-arts?

MW: What struck me was, the democracy of it. The leveling out, the fact that artists were not just from different geographical locations, but different stages of their career or not in a career. It just felt like the meritocracy that we're used to in this country, particularly in Europe, is so heavy, and weighted on us, isn't it?

I mean, I had to wonder what I thought myself of the aesthetic, of some of the qualities of some of what I was seeing. I'll be honest about that. But that tested me. It challenged me, and that's what I'm assuming queering is about. It's about challenging, breaking down, spitting apart.

So, it did that for me, in a way of 'What am I watching? 'Am I watching good stuff? Old stuff? New stuff? I mean, I just couldn't quite read it in the way that I normally read it. It shifted the whole perspective. (...) It did challenge prejudices, but I love the way that you opened it up (...) there was this sense that more people were applying, and so the thing would have to grow to accommodate, much as a tree grows, or the roots. By then I'd got used to the idea. This is curating with the tiniest c.

Daniele J Minns: We were interested in having just a hive-like view of everybody. All at once, and small. So, it was a collective performance, although people were in separate places, and it's sort of not going down the accepted view of what art and performance is, and how it should be seen as an individual doing a thing, and we found that fascinating to see everybody on the screen at the same time.

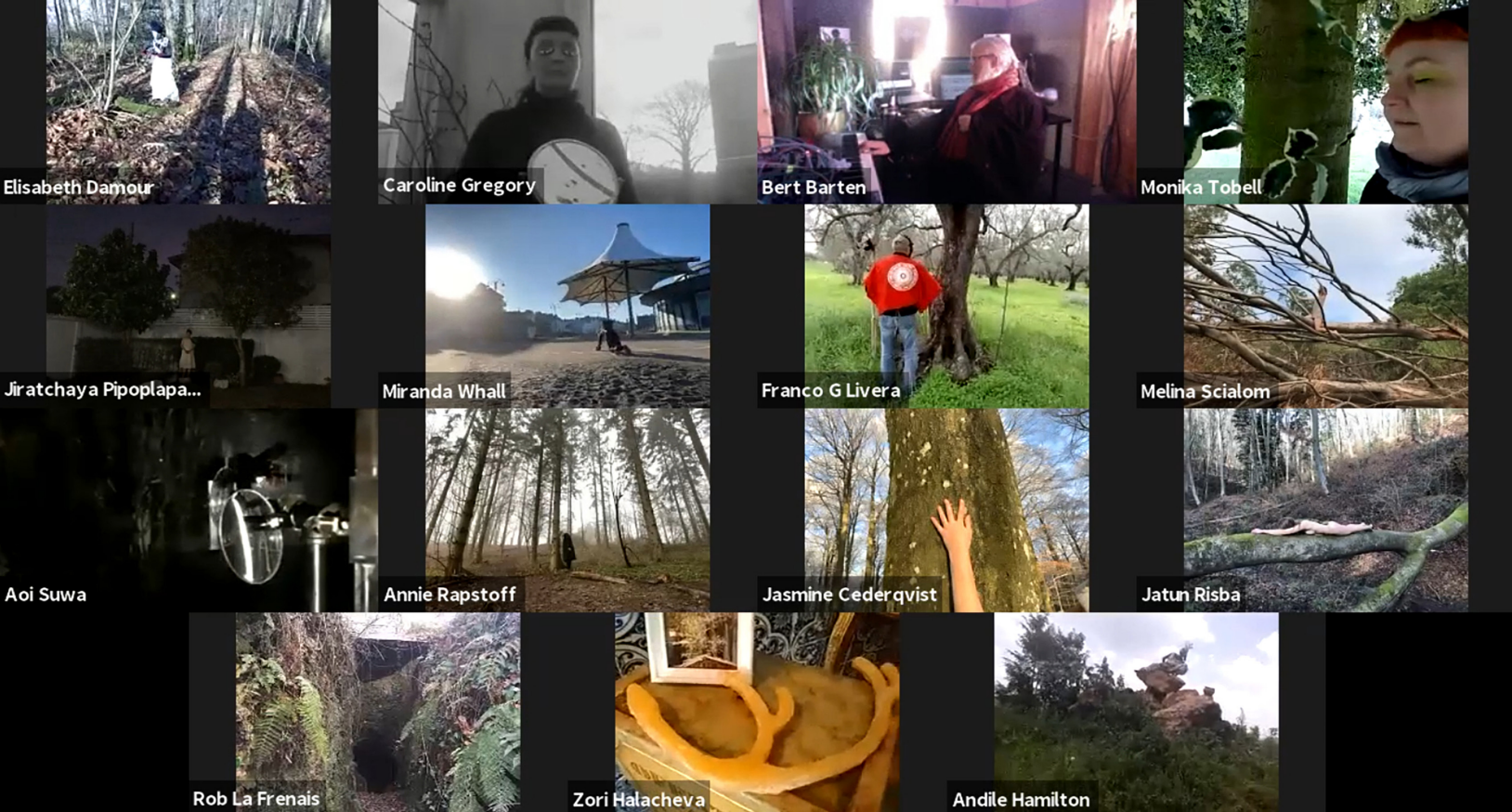
ND: On the queering of nature, I was thinking why is Mother Nature called Mother Nature? Let's try calling it brother nature, sister nature. All these years calling it Mother Nature, let's call it Daughter Nature. How you treat your daughter is different from how you treat your Mother. We talk to our mother, Ma! Mamaa! But if you call it Daughter Nature metaphorically it becomes a different dialogue because you wouldn't throw garbage at your daughter, but you do it on your mother because she will clean it up. But your daughter wouldn't clean it up, you know, so it becomes a different discussion altogether.

O.Pen Be: And everything is measured by more growth, like this [makes vertical, upward moving hand-gesture] which impacts on the world. (...) You can have growth, but it's horizontal growth. It's horizontal, connecting, interdependence, interconnectedness.

MW: I read an interesting article about this, from a Western perspective, that young people can't any longer buy into getting mortgages and houses of their own, and so they're kind of trapped. They can't do that linear growth, that upward growth. And so, they're going outwards. This is this whole questioning of identity and sexuality. I feel like that's in keeping with our need to start connecting with everything else on the surface and under the surface of the planet. We're changing our direction, aren't we? We need to. And many people are joining in on that.

Jatun Risba: From the very beginning, we were interested in inviting artists who are outside the privileged ones. Our aim was always to offer an opportunity for artists who are not seen, and who are not part of the contemporary art arena. And then just let's question, how come they are not there? (...) We were considering intersectionality in every phase of our curation. How to offer a platform for everyone to be able to join in and do the work that they are called to do?

DJM: And also to help people to be aware of ways they can work internationally, using the most basic technology, you're just using a phone and some wi-fi which you know not everybody has access to that. We spent a long time working out



Be-coming Tree artists

Be-coming Tree, Group 1 of 3rd Be-comingTree event, screenshot, 2021 © Be-coming Tree

the simplest, most effective ways for artists to do this, and how to explain the methodologies clearly, so everybody would understand, and then also have a takeaway from it that they'd be able to continue to do this kind of work outside of *Be-coming Tree*.

MW: I've taken on this livestream aspect. I mean, I'm gonna do some more live stream performances, because I like the difference between the intimacy and the global. I just find that interesting and compelling to work with. Across the globe, it's so lovely to be in a conversation with people from Africa India, and Slovenia. I don't get that that much. So yeah, I'm in a bit of an outpost here on the edge of Wales. But I like the live streaming; it makes me feel like I'm connecting way beyond my locality.

OPB: We've always wanted to see if we could get a hybrid between live audience and digital. It does seem possible in the future to have regional ambassadors who reach out to a local community and set up a *Be-coming Tree* event with a live audience. (...)

DM: Which fulfills our vision of this being a decentralised project – we couldn't avoid being central, like a hub, because we were organising everything, but to actually have ambassadors doing similar things in different places simultaneously would be ideal and I think it relates again to – I think it's a new way, isn't it? It's like computer networks are decentralised systems. They must be, because it means if something breaks down, then the whole network doesn't stop working.

ND: I feel like every performer in *Be-coming Tree* is a shaman. I felt like it was Shamanic practice because everyone there was connecting with nature. I was



Dimple B. Shah

Secret Colloquy 2nd Be-coming Tree event, photograph, 2020 © Dimple B. Shah

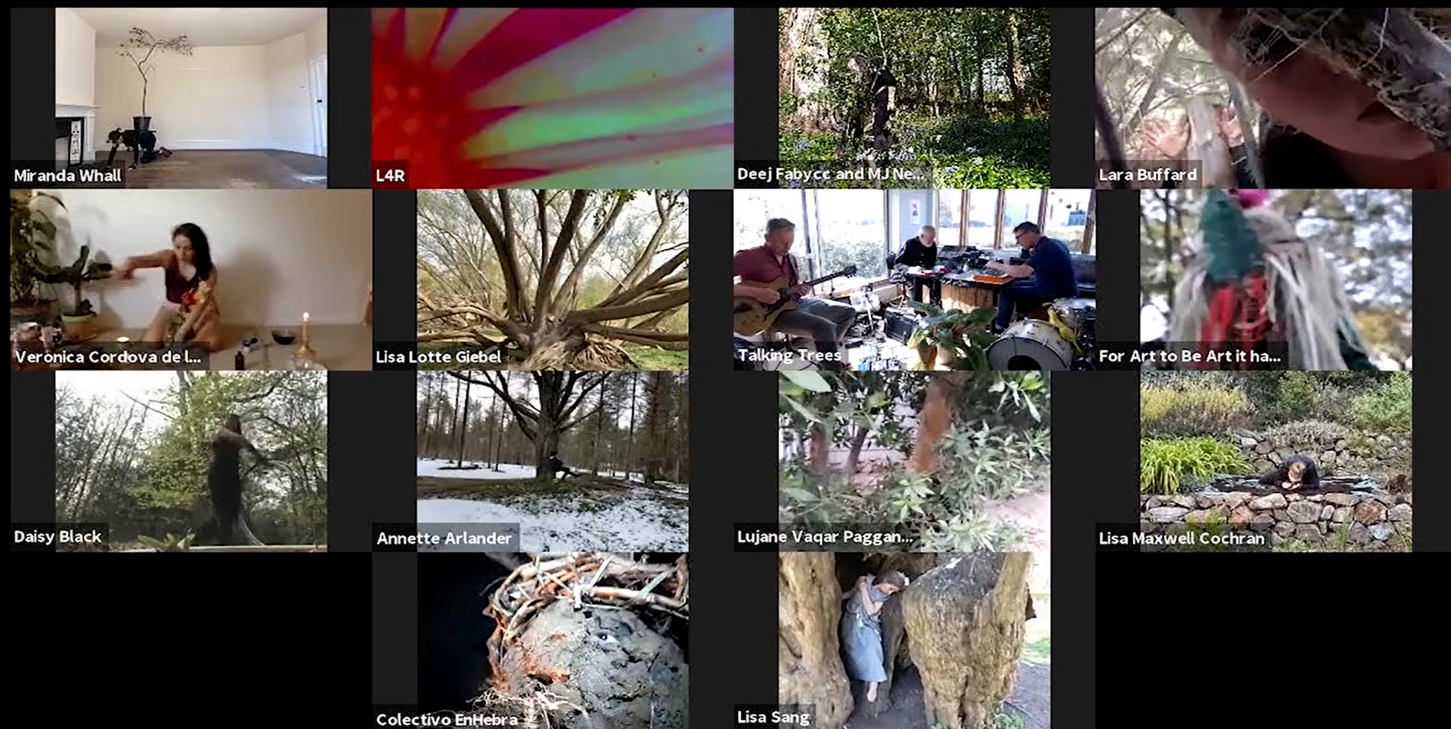
like, “any problem I have right now is going to be released”.

OPB: Witnessing is a big part of our work. Being seen, being felt. What if we say, now you're being witnessed by the plant, how does that feel, and what happens? And it's extraordinary, you know, what comes up. The idea is that nature is looking at you as you are looking at nature. Nature's feeling you and sensing you. It really does something to the heart, it opens. So I hope we were doing that as well, reciprocally witnessing.

ND: People thought we were doing witchcraft [laughs] so we say we're doing witchcraft at a global event [laughs].

AH: It is important that as practitioners, as artists, we first connect land with ourselves, and also with trees, plants, the whole environment, which gives us oxygen (...), and then you'll be in a natural trance or cosmological trance if I might put it like that because these trees, these plants, this energy, this is the whole atmosphere of sacrament, spiritual energy and it is giving you the applause. It's part of the audience. So, you don't need any confirmation from anyone as long as that's from within, from your heart, it's going to do wonders.

ND: Going forward, you know the South African *Toyi-toyi* protest. The protest is artistic, with dancing. So, I was thinking, everywhere around the world people are actually experiencing climate change. *Becoming Tree* needs to be part of our eco protest (...) because environmental awareness is of paramount importance in our generation.



Be-coming Tree artists

Be-coming Tree, Group 3 of 4th Be-coming Tree event, screenshot, 2021 © Be-coming Tree

Roundtable 2

With: Aoi Suwa (Japan), Annette Arlander (Finland)

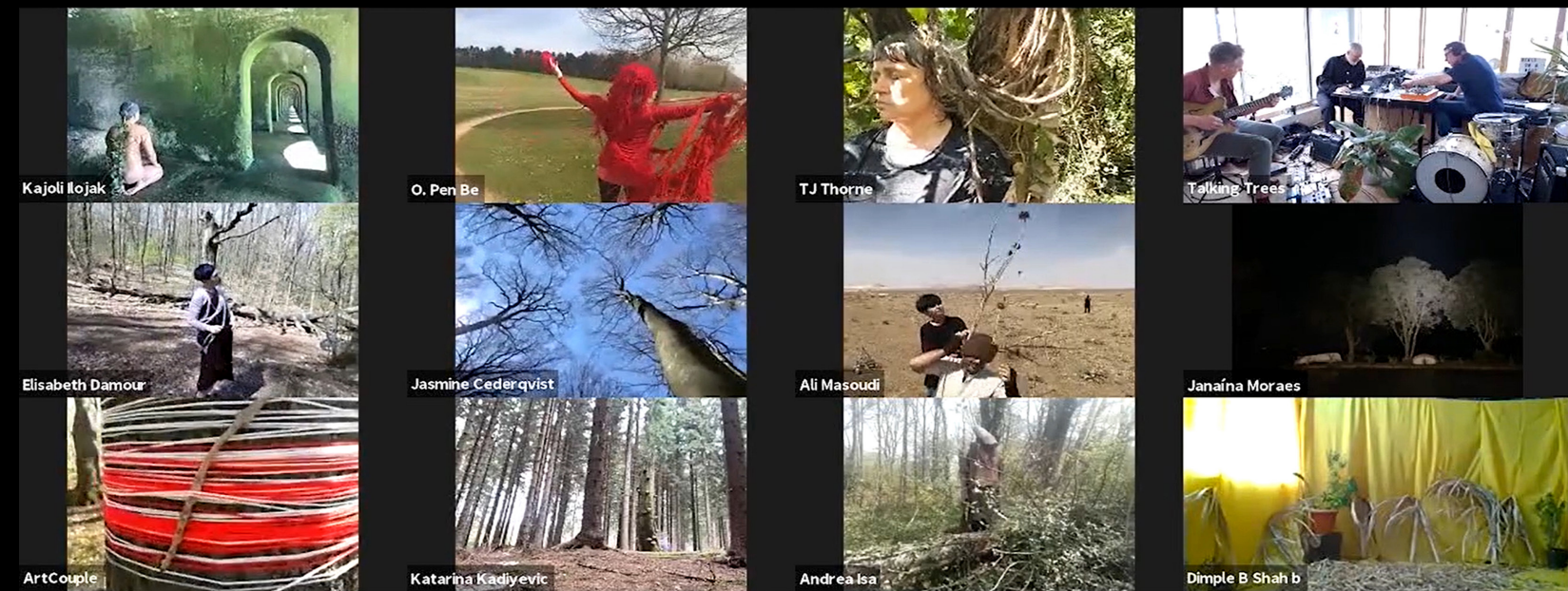
Aoi Suwa:

Non-verbal communication is discussed in many situations, but I never saw such a natural manifestation of non-verbal communication. I mean, *Be-coming Tree* is a very open-ended, abstract image. Embarking on that journey felt like swimming in an invisible pool. I was very fascinated by it because we didn't talk with the use of language but instead used images and our feelings to communicate.

JR: This is a good thought because *Be-coming Tree* was a project that explored other forms of experience and language and was very body-centred. It was also an attempt to open up other ways of engaging with art and also with the environment.

AA: It was in the time of the pandemic. Therefore, it was super important as a gesture. Now it feels so obvious, and everyone is on *Zoom* all the time and it has become part of our everyday life. People are also tired of it now. But back then it was something new. This idea of mediation is really in a sense queering. If it's not 'proper performance art' to perform for a camera, this has changed so much. I'm not saying that *Be-coming Tree* was the only thing to contribute to this change but through the pandemic and the exploration of online performance, the attitude towards practices involving camera and mediation within performance art has changed enormously.

The biggest challenge for me was the duration. This moment of intensity, online together with all these people around the world, who were performing for an audience in real-time but also together with other people. I've been writing about that in different contexts actually and in different ways, so it's been inspiring also intellectually.



Be-coming Tree artists

Be-coming Tree, Group 1 of 4th Be-coming Tree event, screenshot, 2021 © Be-coming Tree

DM: If your practice is normally solo, how did you find that compared to knowing you were performing simultaneously with many others and being witnessed collectively on one screen? Did that affect what you were doing? Did you have an awareness of that? Did it change your practice?

AA: I didn't change my practice and felt somehow that there was a place for me. Of course, part was because you were so open, and the project was very inclusive. What I remember from the 80s when I was part of a performance art group. You know like the bass player boom boom boom, nothing happening, not very interesting but still needed there in the background. So, I thought, my actions were like this "boom boom boom" and actually in that way gave a background to the more expressive pieces.

DJM: I like that you're relating it to an orchestra or a band, with everybody playing different parts simultaneously. (...) Having a common denominator, which was the engagement with trees, made a difference. Somehow the fact that people were engaging with their ecologies brought unity to what was happening that allowed diversity as well.

AS: I'm interested in human nature. I think humans are still part of nature but yeah, of course, humans are already not originally nature. I live in a very contemporary city, and we are disconnected from natural rhythms. But I think nature has beauty, it's a very natural feeling and I'm very interested in this phenomenon. Why do we find beauty in nature? In my opinion, beauty is a message from nature, so that's why I think humans still have nature in our bodies.

OPB: As you were speaking, Aoi, my chest dropped and became calm, and my breathing changed. I noticed that I was sort of going below, under. I was driven towards a more fundamental state of being and this kind of fundamentalness, that feeling of finding the connections, primordial connectivity which is all-pervading,

way below, underneath the appearances, holding and carrying all the diversity. Something like the mycelium network that is enabling the variety of trees and plants and every form of life on earth and the digital networks that are enabling our global communication now and in our *Be-coming Tree* events. How do people feel about the digital as part of the existential continuum?

AA: Well for me it's a constant dilemma. Because I love to perform with trees and perform for the camera with trees. I don't perform with trees without the camera, so I transform my own embodied experiences of contact with trees into digital files and images that become projected video images for people to view. I think of what a good deed would be. Would it be to make artwork where I would invite people to come with me to sit in the trees and feel good by getting some real air and some volatile chemicals and you know enjoying this contact as I do, instead of creating these digital images that are then watched on screens? This is a very concrete example of how I'm literally queering nature. I'm digital queering it. I'm queer digitalizing really and it's sad. I don't like to look at video works, but I like to make video works. That's my dilemma.

Roundtable 3

With: Rob La Frenais (France), Tracy Jean Thorne (England), DeeJ Fabyc (Ireland)

Tracy Jean Thorne: I joined in order to kind of have the opportunity to meet people and work collaboratively, and then got stuck in my shed (in Kent). What I'm exploring now is thinking about how we assume that the trees are our companions. But we're not thinking about it from their experience. And we need to interrogate that gender bias in the way that nature is sort of referred to as human female. In my personal experiences, being neurodiverse, I'm also incorporating some of that around it.

DJM: How does your *Be-coming Tree* experience relate to what you said about the gendering of what we call nature and ecology?

TJT: (...) I worked with women in a domestic abuse refuge, and they basically strapped themselves to each of the 'walking trees' in the road and we all talked about that link between the trees not being able to speak for themselves, nature not being able to speak for itself and that sort of abused and damaged has no voice either. So, for me there is quite a link in that and also that whole mother earth thing and the gender thing.

Just viewing ourselves a little bit more as earthlings rather than members. Incorporating that into a safeguarding aspect, we need to think about that ecological aspect, the post-human tree. I think they (the post-human trees) would be critical of us actually. it has really opened that big thinking process for me around post-humanism and who rules. 'Cause I think we still think that we're at the top of the food chain and therefore we're doing something by protecting the planet. What would the trees say? Would they ask us why we think we're the authors of the world and that sort of is still that thing I'm thinking about?

Rob La Frenais: I mean, this discussion makes me think again about the conference called *More than Planet*. There's a lot of discussion of the 'more than humans', specifically cyanobacteria and various other very large-scale living systems, and then of course Earth systems and one of the things we talked about, this relates a bit to what you've just been saying.

Since this notion of the human, where the human is in the food chain, but also The *Gaia* hypothesis by James Lovelock which was developed of course in collaboration with the microbiologist Lynn Margulis who challenged that sort of sixties and seventies reign of the evolutionary biologists like Richard Dawkins

who came up with this very masculinist version of biology, the survival of the fittest. Evolution, you know, survival of the strongest and Lynn Margulis was one microbiologist who said that it also involves collaboration. It's not just about kill or be killed, or you know that on the microbiological level for sure, collaboration is important and I think that's reflected in what you were saying about your entwining relationship with the tree and becoming more than human, that maybe we need to look back at what it says, to Lovelock and Margulis' hypothesis which is still very relevant. It's been kind of also rejected because it got taken up by the neopaganists and science is actually coming around to have more time for the Gaia hypothesis as was reflected in the conference *More than Planet*. The recognition of science is going to be very important.

JR: I want to jump in and put out an aspect that was crucial in this project. It's the in-betweenness, the awareness that we humans are not separate from the world or from other species, from the animal or plant worlds. And this whole notion of becoming a tree is pointing in this direction, trying to shine through these very diverse, multiple webs of life that are all interconnected and where the well-being of one species is connected to the well-being of all the rest, of the whole environment. And this title, *Be-coming Tree* is a term that I coined inspired by the notion of becoming (yet) it's sort of queering already in detail because of the dash. It's not becoming, like the usual notion of becoming of Deleuze and Guattari [1], it is be-coming. It's trying to unify the importance of 'being' of embodying in the present, while also being open to the dynamics of change. It was a really important decision for me to call it that way, 'be-coming'. And to keep this tension between 'being' and 'coming', coming undone, open-ended. So, embracing fluidity and overcoming polarisations.

So, maybe, another queering aspect of the project was about disrupting and challenging contemporary power dynamics, like the transformative economy model that *Be-coming Tree* was incorporating. The way we embedded tree-planting donations in the 'pay-what-you-like' tickets for the audience attending the *Zoom* event, was really helping to raise awareness of the interconnectedness and responsibility for the current ecological disruption, for how we are responding to the challenges of climate change, and also it activated the audience, transformed them into co-participants or companions, an active part of the whole project.

RLF: Hmm. That's interesting you mentioned companion because I was thinking about Donna Haraway as well. Her *Companion Species* [1]. And, also again, I was thinking about the food chain. (...) So we have this paradox that we have on one hand this idea of ingesting animals that has been kind of part of living on the planet, but at the same time this massive overbreeding and ingestion of other species. We know the planet will go on without us but we'll not be able to survive on the planet because of what we've been doing to the earth system in that way. So, I think what we actually put in our mouths to eat will be and it is, I think, politically very important.

Deej Fabyc: We're lucky enough to have a soil scientist and engineer as one of our local farmers who comes and talks to us here at *Live Art Ireland*... he's suggesting that caring for the land and, you know, as a custodian of the land, it's not just about letting it go wild. Being a custodian might mean putting large grasses on the land at times; it might mean cutting the grass or allowing creatures to eat the grass, to maintain certain environments. Rewilding must be done very carefully because otherwise, it can, actually, not really work so well for the total biosphere of that environment. (...) I think that this debate is very layered and very rich and there's so much here we can think about.

Across the three discussions, addressing the topic of *queering nature* offered a platform to interrogate, transform, and transcend existing norms and classifications deriving from the modernist divide between human culture and nature. *Be-coming Tree* proved to be an innovative initiative sowing reciprocity within the more-than-human world, where Live Art becomes part of a living culture of mutual care and solidarity engaged with global welfare and earthly thriving. For the survival of ecodiversity, within and without art.

Endnotes

[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Translated by Brian Massumi, Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 2008)
[2] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003)

Be-coming Tree (<https://becomingtree.live/>) is a co-creation of three female/queer artists aged 36 to 75, each with independent arts practices. Jatun Risba: transmedia artist whose practice fertilises mutuality between species and Earthly kinship. Daniele Minns: sound/live/video artist using digital technologies to highlight connectedness of all phenomena. O.Pen Be: dance psychotherapist using relational somatic work as enquiry into inter-corporealities. Collectively we challenge embedded hierarchical structures to increase global interconnectedness, eco-awareness and sustainability, using technology in service of life, to create more inclusive, cooperative and sustainable structures for (Live) Art in reciprocity with the environment.