

Annette Arlander:

What is given?

In this case the focus is on context, or the environment, the performer-environment relationship. The ecology of organism and environment – rather than ask how they are related or combined, to ask how they are distinguished or constituted...

Ecology has the same root as economy, related to *oikos*, household or home. And taking care of our household business is the often neglected and devalued basis for everything we do. If we despite our increasing mobility fail to see the world as our home, but keep behaving as if our individual body was our only home and everything outside it a wasteland (the business of somebody else to take care of, while we move on) our home the planet, will soon be in a bad mess. I could simply add what we all know, that ecology and economy go together.

Although I am interested in performing and collaborating with plants, especially trees, it might also be valuable to remember the importance of understanding ecology as more than nature, even conceiving of an ecology without nature, as Timothy Morton has done. In the old classic, *The Three Ecologies*, published already in 1989, Felix Guattari states "Nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between eco-systems... we must learn to think 'transversally' " (Guattari, 2000, 43)

In the three ecologies Guattari reminds us of the mental and the social ecologies, besides the environmental and planetary ones, that we usually think of when speaking of ecology, and insists that all three of them need to be considered together and as interconnected. He opens his text with an epigraph by Gregory Bateson. "There is an ecology of bad ideas just as there is an ecology of weeds". The English translator has kindly provided the full quotation.

In the strange collection of texts called *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind* published in 1972 Gregory Bateson wrote:

"Let us now consider what happens when you make the epistemological error of choosing the wrong unit: you end up with the species versus the other species around it or versus the environment in which it operates. Man against nature. You end up, in fact, with Kaneohe Bay [in Hawaii] polluted. Lake Erie [in Canada] a slimy green mess, and 'Let's build more atom bombs to kill off the next-door neighbours.' There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess. When you narrow down your epistemology and act on the premise 'What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,' you chop off consideration of other loops of the loop structure. You decide that you want to get rid of the by-products of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place to put them. You forget that the eco-mental system called Lake Erie is a part of your wider eco-mental system - and that if Lake Erie is

driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience (Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind 1972, p. 484)

Elsewhere in the same book Bateson explained: "Formally we thought of a hierarchy of taxa – individual, family line, subspecies, species etc. – as units of survival. We now see a different hierarchy of units – gene-in organism, organism-in-environment, ecosystems, etc. Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e. differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits". (Bateson 1972, p 49.)

Theatre scholar Baz Kershaw sums up some of Bateson's ideas: "The basis for this argument is that what homo sapiens calls thinking is not just located in the human mind, or in culture, but also in many of the processes of the 'natural world' .... The feedback gained through trial and error in these systems at any particular time will tend to push them either towards 'homeostasis', a state of equilibrium, or to 'runaway', a state of self-harm. Utterly key to this account of systemic 'thinking' is that it does not make sense to separate 'organisms' from 'environments' as they are aspects of the *same* system. [So following Bateson ] "What thinks is the total system which engages in trial and error.... The unit of survival is organism plus environment." (Bateson 1972, 16-17) Hence the meta-system of sustaining life on Earth is an 'ecology of mind'." (Kershaw 2007, 248)

Guattari, however, criticized and further developed Bateson's idea of organism plus environment (or action plus context) by claiming that an action or rupture can transform its context. And he had great faith in aesthetics:

"We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of:

- a nascent subjectivity
- a constantly mutating socius
- an environment in the process of being reinvented,

....it should be understood that the three ecologies originate from a common ethico-aesthetic discipline [he adds], and are also distinct from the point of view of the practices that characterize them. Their different styles are produced by what...[he calls]... heterogenesis, in other words, processes of continuous resingularization.

Individuals must become both more united and increasingly different. The same is true for the resingularization of schools, town councils, urban planning etc.

By means of these transversal tools, subjectivity is able to install itself simultaneously in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual..." (Guattari 2000, pp. 68-69)

The idea of organism and environment as given has been contested as well. In 2012, referencing studies on colonies of slime-mold, physicists and queer theorist Karen Barad asks “[h]ow can we expect the notion of an organism understood as an individual that is situated in a container we call the environment to begin to speak to the complexity of the intra-active reconfiguring of bodily boundaries that defines the slime mold’s astonishing material existence?” (Barad 2012a, 77.).

We are even more entangled with our surroundings than Bateson imagined...

In a manner important for artistic research Barad states: “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are *of* the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad 2007, 185.). For Barad, separating epistemology from ontology is part of “a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse” (ibid). Barad suggests we need “something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being...” (ibid).

For Barad, “experimenting and theorizing are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning... [they] are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of the phenomena produced” (Barad, 2007, 56.). Knowing for Barad is a physical practice of engagement: “Scientific practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest” (Barad, 2007, 336.). In a similar manner we could say that artistic practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest. The artist-researcher is literally producing phenomena — artworks or performances — and not only observing them, (as has been emphasized these days, too.)

Barad’s ideas of material-discursive practices that constitute subjects and objects are helpful here. For Barad the primary ontological units are not ‘things’ but phenomena — dynamic topological reconfigurings/ entanglements/ relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not ‘words’ but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. /--/ The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 141). The fact that apparatuses are productive of the phenomena they measure does not mean that reality is a product of human concepts, Barad maintains; rather, concepts are specific material arrangements (Barad 2007, p. 334). For her, discourse is not a synonym for language and meaning or intelligibility are not a 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, p. 335).

In recent years many attempts at moving beyond an anthropocentric perspective have been made. One example is the notion vegetal democracy, a principle that concerns

all species without exception, developed by Michael Marder. The division of the world into mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms, “the great chain of being” with rocks at the bottom and humans at the top is a traditional stratification that influences our way of making and understanding performances. In his study *Plant-Thinking* (2013) Marder offers a critique of this legacy by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics. Although more focused on philosophy than vegetation his work prompts us to reconsider our relationship to the environment.

According to Marder an inherent divisibility and participation are paramount in the life of plants; a vegetal being must “remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows” and its relation to the elements is not domineering but receptive. (Marder 2013, 69.) For him “the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an ontological 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’”. (Marder 2013, 53.) What this vegetal democracy might mean in practice, however, Marder does not explain.

While analysing the relationship of plants to their environment he observes that plants seem not to be 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. In order to exist a vegetal being must “remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows.” A plant’s relation to the elements is not domineering but receptive, as when a flower or leaf turn their widest surfaces to the sun, or the way the root imbibes everything, whether nutrients or poisonous substances, in the soil into which it burrows, he adds. (Marder 2013, 69.)

### Projecting and Image on the Site of its Making

During the summer 2014 I made experiments with performances in two parts: The first part was a pre-performance with the participants swinging, documented on video. The second part was a solo performance with me swinging in relationship to the projected video documentation of that participatory event. In the autumn 2015 I made another attempt using the same technique.

One participatory pre-performance took place at the opening of the exhibition Water Images on Harakka Island on 29 May 2014. The swing was fastened to an old birch in the yard and visitors were invited to swing. An edited version of the documentation, was projected onto the same birch for a performance, *Swinging in Moonlight*, at the Moonlight Party on 9 August 2014. The projection was visible against the white trunk of the birch at night as a temporal and visual mixture, resembling a double exposure. Parts of the durational performance were recorded.

I will show you the material, the edited version of the swinging that was projected back on the site, next to the documentation of the performance of trying to swing together with the projected image.

Another experiment, *Swinging Together*, took place in 2015 as part of the environmental art exhibition *LARU Human era 2015* at Särkiniemi peninsula in Lauttasaari. To be near the only possible source of electricity I had to fasten the swing in a young and weak rowan. On Friday August 28 I invited passers-by in the park to swing, recorded them swinging, and edited the video for the performance on August 29. At the opening, while waiting for the sun to set, I invited the audience to swing and to lean back and look up at the sky through the foliage in order for them to experience the feeling. At nightfall I performed my attempt at synchronised swinging, not as a durational performance but only once, with the 20 min. video, for the small group of spectators who had patiently waited for the darkness with me. Unlike in the previous version, where the projection formed an independent shadow on the roof or the tree trunk, my body now turned into a projection screen, which merged with the environment and the movement of the swingers.

In this third iteration of the performance three aspects of the event appeared in succession: a) a participatory aspect: the experiential performance of swinging, b) a visual aspect: the projection slowly appearing on the tree alongside the sunset, and c) the performance aspect: an attempt to swing in synchronicity with the projection. And that third aspect is the one I am inviting you to try out now, in turns. Please be aware that the swings are not built for swinging, so please move carefully... (an example of the restrictions of the given, if you wish) when you try to respond to what is given in this case, the recorded images and each other...

Conclusions (skipped at the actual event)

Methodologically the experiences of these variations of swinging together point to the importance of the context and the set up for performance as research, as well as the value of repetition and small changes in circumstances, for generating what might emerge as unforeseen possibilities and meanings due to a slight shift in emphasis. In these cases, no pre-planned variations of the 'experimental arrangement' were included; the shifts occurred simply by adapting to changing circumstances, to what was given.

Considering the materiality or the material-discursive practices involved in these experiments, the main collaborators or intra-acting components were the tree, the swing, and the body, although the balance between them varied slightly in the versions. Other components of intra-action involved the surrounding vegetation, the human spectators or contributors (including their participation, willingness to perform and be recorded), the technology (including the machines for recording, editing and projecting the videos), and the various forms of light (including sunlight or darkness and electric light). Further material-discursive practices relate to the idea of

performance (including the conventions of gathering together to watch people engaged in an activity and the notion of doing an action rather than representing an action) and to the concepts used in the discourse of moving images.

The various expectations of the organizers, audiences and participants, including me, as well as the situational circumstances during the pre-performances and the actual performance events, produced variations in emphasis. The differing material-discursive practices of the contexts – an all-night performance art event (the first experiment, not presented here), an opening of a summer exhibition and a party, an environmental art exhibition – defined what was considered a meaningful contribution (i.e. a performed action, an opportunity for experiential participation, a poetic image). They delineated which elements were understood as part of the work and which were circumstantial (i.e. the performing body, the projected image, the movement, the surroundings), and determined what was deemed important or incidental. Using the terms of Barad one could say that matter and meaning were intra-actively produced in differing ways, due to the shifting entanglements and agential cuts involved in each version, which were conditioning what mattered and what was excluded from mattering.