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WRITING WITH A PINE – ADDRESSING A TREE AS AUDIENCE

ABSTRACT

Writing letters to trees next to the trees with a camera as witness is a practice connected to the problem of speaking for, with, or to others. Addressing the tree as an audience rather than speaking about the tree, or as the tree, or on behalf of the tree, is here explored as one way of encountering trees. This poses new problems; by treating plants as persons, rather than acknowledging the vegetal in me, do I neglect our joint participation in *zoe*, and disregard our trans-corporeality? Is addressing the tree in writing actually making our relationship more fictional compared to simply breathing and appearing together? - The text consists of four parts, including a prologue, the letter, a dialogue with critical references and an epilogue. Besides exploring the problem of addressing a tree, the aim is to demonstrate how artistic research can allow seemingly contradictory approaches to coexist on an experiential level.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Kirjeiden kirjoittaminen puille niiden luona, kamera todistajana, kytkeytyy kysymykseen puhumisesta toisten puolesta, toisten kanssa tai toisille. Puun puhuttelemisen yleisönä, sen sijaan että puhuisi puusta tai puuna tai puun puolesta, näyttäytyy tässä eräänä mahdollisuutena kohdata puu. Näin syntyy puolestaan uusia kysymyksiä: unohdanko jaetun olemassaolomme *zoe*n piirissä ja jätän huomiotta ruumiidenvälisyytemme, kun kohtelen kasveja henkilöinä sen sijaan, että tunnistaisin kasvimaisuuden itsessäni? Verrattuna siihen, että vain hengittäisimme ja esiintyisimme yhdessä, lisääkö puun puhuttelemisen kirjoittamalla tosiasiaa suhteemme kuvitteellisuutta? – Teksti koostuu neljästä osasta, sisältäen alkusanat, kirjeen, kriittisillä viitteillä täydennetyt vuoropuhelun ja jälkisanat. Pyrkimyksenä on, paitsi pohtia puun puhuttelemisen ongelmaa, näyttää miten taiteellinen tutkimus voi sallia keskenään vastakkaisilta vaikuttavien lähestymistapojen yhteisolemisen kokemuksen tasolla.

PROLOGUE

Writing letters to trees by the trees is one way of encountering trees, of performing together with them, one of the practices I have explored in the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.¹ Writing letters to trees next to the trees with a camera as witness proposes the camera as the representative of the spectator, as the substitute of a future viewer. The camera also stands in for the author, who takes a dual role as performer and witness with the help of technology. What about the tree? Could we consider the tree as a spectator or viewer as well? The tree serves as co-performer, of course, not only as a setting or prop but a contributor. While addressed, the tree becomes an audience as well. By writing a letter to the tree in the presence of the tree, the tree not only acts as a witness or viewer to the act of writing, but also serves as the addressee, an audience that I speak to. Addressing the tree as an audience, an interlocutor of sorts, creates another position than considering the tree as a witness. The question of the tree as audience is connected to the problem of speaking for, with, or to others, which was my main concern in the experiment I will describe in the following.² Addressing the tree rather than speaking about the tree, or as the tree, or on behalf of the tree, is one way of encountering trees and performing with them. Could addressing the tree be a more appropriate way than speaking for the tree or on behalf of the tree? Rather than try to give the tree a voice with technology,³ I try to create an I-You -relationship with them. Rather than speaking for or on behalf of the tree I try to speak to the tree. Rather than writing about trees I try to write with or next to them. This poses new problems; is turning the tree into my audience once again “silencing” the tree, focusing on human action rather than the tree’s mode of being; is writing as a technique or method actually emphasizing our difference by making our relationship more human centred and more fictional compared to simply breathing and appearing together?

Before I present my experiment, a few words about the context: In the artistic research project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (Arlander 2020d), I encounter individual trees that are either remarkable in their environment or rather unremarkable and spend time with them in order to create video works and video essays. The title of the project alludes to the photography book *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* by Thomas Pakenham (1996) and the project is in some sense forming a counterpoint to it, by questioning what is remarkable and worthy of attention and what is unremarkable, while focusing on individual trees. The medium in this project is not photography, however, but rather performance for video and recorded voice. Although the project focuses on individual trees, this is not to deny that trees form networks and ecosystems or symbiotic relationships not only with other trees but with fungi, bacteria and all kinds of micro-organisms, and are in a constant exchange with their environment, as humans are as well. To focus on singular trees can nevertheless be useful as a first step towards decolonizing our relationship with ‘nature’. As late ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003) pointed out, colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and to see ‘them’ as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualised. Thus, attending to particular trees might work as a way to help us see trees as life forms that we have much in common with, despite our undeniable differences.

¹ For a brief presentation of the project, see <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/meetings-with-remarkable-and-unremarkable-trees/>

² Therefore, my main interest here is not the audience as an idea, or audience participation, which is a core concern in theatre, discussed for example by Gareth White (2013).

³ Or with the help of poetry, like for example, Wendy Burk’s *Tree Talks* or Stephanie Kaza’s *Conversations with Trees*.

Artistically the project can be placed at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and video or media 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. In scholarly terms the project could be situated within the field of critical plant studies, and methodologically within performance as research. There is a current ‘plant turn’ in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, accompanied by an abundance of popular accounts of research on plant sentience, intelligence, memory and communication.⁴ Rethinking our relationship to other forms of life that we share this planet with 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 wants to contribute to this growing field with examples of relatively simple artistic practices, writing letters to trees being one of them.

The questions explored in the letter that serves as the centre piece of this article are focused on whether writing a letter to a tree with the tree would be an ethically viable way to try to communicate or respect the subjectivity of the tree. That questioning was the starting point for this text, which is based on a recent lecture⁵ and is further developing some topics previously discussed in the context of performance philosophy⁶ and performance as research. When reflecting on the letter afterwards, other questions appear, like whether personifying the tree and engaging in a typically human activity like writing actually neglects to foreground our shared participation in *zoe*, in life extended beyond the human? By treating plants as persons, following Matthew Hall’s (2011) ideas, rather than acknowledging the vegetal in me, as Michael Marder (2013a) suggests, do I neglect our joint participation in *zoe*, to use Rosi Braidotti’s term for life (2017), and disregard our trans-corporeality, the notion Stacy Alaimo has coined for our interconnectedness (2010)? The “recognition of plants as persons” means for Hall “the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives.”⁷ Marder finds the idea of plant personhood problematic,⁸ emphasizing rather the divisibility of plants. He tries to de-personify thinking, proposing an impersonal *It thinks*: “At the core of the subject who proclaims: ‘I think’, lies the subjectless vegetal it thinks, at once shoring up and destabilizing the thinking of this ‘I.’”⁹ Thus, instead of emphasising the personhood of plants, we should, following Marder, rather look at the plant-like base of our own subjectivity. Moreover, is the act of addressing the tree in writing “othering” the tree rather than focusing on creating a connection? Is writing as a technique or method actually emphasizing our difference rather than our commonalities?

In this article I am exploring some of the questions that influenced the letter by creating a dialogue or extended ‘notation’ of sorts. The notes consist of the ingredients, the various discourses that underpin and have contributed to the letter. My aim is to show how artistic practice and particularly performance as research as a methodology, can create a space for connections between ideas that would not usually be discussed together. Thus, this article, serves on the one hand as an

4 For example, Pollan 2002; Mancuso et al. 2015 Wohlleben 2016; Chamovitz 2017; Gagliano 2018.

5 This text is based on a lecture Knowledge in the Arts #2 30.3.2021, organised by the International Centre for Knowledge in the Arts.

6 The video essay *Hanging in a Pine – with text* was presented at the conference “Between Institution and Intoxication: How does Performance Philosophy Intervene?” at University of Amsterdam 14-17.3.2019. See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=592026>

7 Hall 2011, 169.

8 Marder 2013b, 37 footnote 5.

9 Marder 2013a, 170.

example of the problems related to attempts at addressing trees in writing and on the other hand as an example of the possibilities involved in experimenting with the format of a framed and annotated video essay. The text consists in four parts: a prologue (this introduction), a transcript of the voice-over text (including a video link), a lengthy dialogue developed from notes linked to questions hinted at in the letter and finally an epilogue returning to the problem of addressing trees.

The video *Writing with a Pine (with text)* was made as a video essay for a scholarly context, not as an artwork, while also being an example of the many letters to trees written during the project Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, where performances for a video camera on tripod are the main tool in my encounters with trees. It could be understood as an attempt to engage with trees in line with Michael Marder's (2018) suggestion that plants are the artists of being, in accordance with Natasha Myers' (2017) call to stage liveable futures for plants and people in a planthropocene and as a response to Prudence Gibson's (2018) proposal for a plant contract, to overcome the gap between human and plant life with the mediation of art. I have attempted a more extensive description of the context with regard to critical plant studies elsewhere.¹⁰ Here the expression used by Ursula K Le Guin (2017), which I encountered only a few days after writing the letter, "to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us" could serve as an introduction to the attempt.

The letter that forms the voice-over of the video, is a combination of two letters written one after the other to a pine tree on Örö on the 10th November 2020, during a one-month residency on the island.¹¹ They were written by hand in a notebook while sitting on a branch of the tree, as a performance in real-time for a tripod-mounted camera.¹² Since the letter is based on associative writing, written in that very moment, not all of the topics hinted at in the beginning are actually discussed. The dialogue section after the letter, which is an extension of a compilation of notes added to the letter, tries to provide a discussion of those topics to complement and augment the letter.

THE LETTER

"Writing with a Pine (with text)"

Link to video: <https://vimeo.com/489928937>

(the transcript of the voice-over text on the video)

Örö 10th November 2020

Dearest Pine Tree,

Excuse me for bumping into your 'lap' without notice, coming to you like this without forewarning, and disturbing you this November afternoon. It is a great pleasure and honour to be able to sit on your branch and address you with this letter, and simply to be with you and to spend time with you on this island, a former military area that has been turned into a national park and opened to the public only five years ago. (1) I am grateful to you for appearing or performing together with me for this brief moment and for allowing me to record this meeting with a video camera. (2) At this point I probably have to explain why I address you formally like this, and I also have to apologize

¹⁰ Arlander 2019b, 2020b.

¹¹ Arlander 2020h.

¹² The combined text was read and recorded and then inserted into the second video image. The text variations that served as material are available in a blog post 11.11.2020. <https://meetingswithtrees.com/2020/11/11/writing-with-a-pine/>

for addressing you in English, which is not my native language, nor your preferred language, I assume. What your preferred language would be I do not even dare guess, something with volatile chemicals, perhaps. (3) The reason for this formal address is that I hope this letter will reach other humans and not only you, that is, humans will hear or probably read this letter as an example of my practice of writing letters to trees. And unlike some other letters to trees I have written, this will be a letter pondering on letter writing and especially writing letters to trees, so it will be a 'meta-letter' of sorts, probably, at least on some level, since my aim is to consider this practice in terms of its ethical and artistic implications; at least I will try to do that. Meanwhile, I also hope that these thoughts will somehow reach you, if not through these words, then through my thoughts. And even though you might not be able to read my thoughts in a strict sense, I hope you will be able to sense my intentions, somehow, and to affirm that they are benign and respectful. I would not like to bother you with ponderings that have no relevance for you if I did not feel that you somehow accept being part of this attempt. And I do not really demand any response from you; I simply try to articulate my thoughts in your presence, in writing, as clearly as possible, so that you can sense them in your manner, or then my intentions at least, and my respect, if nothing else. With all your experience of winter storms, military assaults and visiting tourists, lately, you are of course accustomed to many things, including human attention.

Anyway, I hope you are well this lovely afternoon, which is truly exceptional by being completely still. The reason I came to you today is exactly that, the extraordinary situation that there is no wind. It is so quiet that I can hear the buzz from the radar tower, not far from here. I have been here only for little more than a week, so I cannot say for sure, but as I hear it is usually windy here, and so far, the wind has been strong day in and day out. You have spent all your life here, so you should know. (4) Well, let us enjoy this moment of stillness as a beautiful exception! The island is full of pine trees, both old and young ones, and many of you are bent in strange contortions due to the constant wind, and some of you, being broken in storms, keep on growing from what was left; remarkable bravery, I must say. You too, have a rather precarious position next to the sand pit, with a portion of your trunk and half of your roots, or what is left of them, resting in mid-air. The branches that I sit on have reached far out on the slope to counterbalance that, I suppose. I actually visited you last week, as you might remember, and even posed for the video camera together with you, because I was so impressed by your place of growth. There is a big hole where sand has been extracted right next to you, to the right from where I sit. I tried to pose with your roots, creating a small video that I call "On the Edge", but that is another story. (5) This time I chose to place the camera in a such a way that your precarious position does not show. Why did I do that, actually? Your 'bravery' was what caught my attention to begin with. Perhaps as a gesture of respect, I guess, because I wanted to show you at your best, not as the vulnerable creature you are, like all of us. Or because I wanted to focus on my main concerns now, this act of writing, of "performing writing for camera" on the one hand and of addressing you as a tree with a letter on the other. Usually, letters are written to those who are absent, not to those present, of course. But somehow it feels easier to address you in writing than through speech, probably because I hope that formulating or articulating my thoughts into words could make them somehow clearer for you to discern.

This attempt at addressing you is a result of various attempts at performing with trees; I have been experimenting with posing with trees repeatedly for quite some time, while the idea of writing letters to trees, like the one I am writing to you now, is something I have explored only recently. (6)

Much earlier I wrote small texts on behalf of trees, and spoke them as the trees, as if the trees would speak, hanging some earphones on the branches of those talking trees for passers-by to listen to in a series of site-specific monologues called Trees Talk. (7) But that was not a very satisfying way of performing together. It was more like using the trees to hang stories on, as puppets in puppet theatre. - Well, what am I doing now, then? I am sitting on you as if on a wooden bench in a park, and writing 'stories' again. Well, not exactly. There is a difference in trying to address you, to talk to you or with you, to engage in a conversation with you, however clumsy or one-sided that might be, compared to speaking for you or on behalf of you. Speaking for others is ethically challenging, sometimes necessary, but often misguided. (8) Listening might be the best option in many cases, and that is what I have tried to do previously. Or, if not directly listening, then being in the vicinity of, being nearby (9), sitting with you or some of your relatives, breathing together, growing together, sharing our participation in *zoe* (10), in life, and engaging in trans-corporeal (11) exchanges, with all the chemicals and magnetic or other waves and various substances floating between us and through us. That is probably a more reasonable way of trying to perform together, after all, because this letter-writing is strangely one-sided. After all, letters are usually written to people who are not present.

By addressing you in writing I am of course also risking a "pathetic fallacy" of sorts, projecting human sentiments on trees and other living beings, thinking of you as a kind of human being, or even risking some kind of romantic and idealist notion of "merging with nature." (12) Put in another way, however, it would be an even more pathetic fallacy, a stupid mistake, I think, to assume that you would not be able to sense my presence in some manner. So, perhaps the risk is not so dangerous. An I-You relationship with other living beings is worth striving for (13), and our manner of speaking matters. (14)

All right, I am not suggesting that you can read this letter. Or even read my thoughts, but by at least trying to address you in this way, I feel there is some possibility for contact opened between us. Rather than thinking of you as the 'Other', something wholly different and unreachable, I prefer to think of you as a relative, a distant one but a relative, nevertheless. And in some sense, we share the same ancestors, I guess. (15) Nevertheless, simply spending time together, listening to you rather than addressing you, might be a more appropriate form of conversation.

Anyway, my time is up, and I want to thank you for this moment together, for your friendliness, patience and generosity, and I want you to know that I really do appreciate the possibility to spend time with you here today. Thank you once more, and all the best for the coming winter!

Yours AA

DIALOGUE

By writing a letter to the pine tree, rather than posing for a camera with specific trees repeatedly for a year or a day, in order to create rough time-lapse videos,¹³ or using a more theatrical or representational mode, including a third element between the performer and the spectator, a character of sorts, which I tried earlier in some site-specific monologues, where I was speaking as a tree, I was addressing the tree directly. Rather than try to give the tree a voice or agency with technology, I tried to create an I-You -relationship by addressing the tree and writing a letter to the tree by the tree. Rather than speaking for the tree or on behalf of the tree I tried to speak to the tree, or with the tree. Rather than

¹³ Arlander 2019b, 2019c, 2020a.

writing about trees I tried to write next to them, with them in some sense. This poses new problems; am I simply re-inventing a poetic convention?¹⁴ By treating plants as persons¹⁵, rather than trying to find the vegetal dimension of my own subjectivity¹⁶, am I thereby neglecting our joint participation in *zoe*¹⁷, and disregarding the trans-corporeal exchanges¹⁸ between us? Does addressing the tree in writing actually emphasize our differences compared to performing for camera together and appearing together in the image space? I will return to these questions at the end of the following notes, a lengthy dialogue with the various sources. The numbers refer to the numbers inserted in the letter, to remind the reader of their origin as notes, and to open the discourses referred to, but the following dialogue section can well be read without going back to the letter. The impatient reader, uninterested in the multiple contexts that contributed to the letter, is advised to jump directly to the epilogue. For the patient reader, willing to follow on a winding path, I suggest we begin with the site:

(1) Örö is part of the Archipelago National Park in southwestern Finland. I spent November month 2020 in Öres residency, housed in an old wooden building originally used by Russian military officers. The military history of the island is described in “Örö Fortress Island”, combined with information about national parks as well as advertising for tourist facilities. Off season there is a ferry to the island once a week. The artist-run “Öres” residency program is focused on interdisciplinary projects and provides a working and living space for artists and researchers alike. Importantly, the island is covered with pines.

(2) The idea of a pine performing might seem counterintuitive. Performing plants are nevertheless discussed for instance in the anthology *The Green Thread. Dialogues with the Vegetal World* (2015). In their introduction Patricia Vieira, Monica Gagliano, and John Ryan note that “performance refers to events outside of the theater-based dyad of human audience” and understood in this broader sense “a performer (or actant; here also the plant) does (or conveys) something and a spectator (or participant) observes (or interacts) with something.”¹⁹ They further note that “the emphasis on performance as an aspect of the everyday seems eminently suited to the reconceptualization of the vegetal world as performative.”²⁰ Asking “what sorts of activities should constitute their performativity, as well as our performances with and of them?” they suggest at least two broad categories: First “the intrinsic performativity of plants is their ecological poiesis: bearing seeds, irrupting in flowers, sprouting rhizomes, uncoiling leaves, attracting pollinators, garnering human attention, and mobilizing transnational networks.”²¹ And second, “living plants are also made to perform: in (and as) topiaries, gardens, parks, reserves, varieties, cultivars, hybrids, genetically modified crops, and even works of art.”²² They suggest “that plants actually and materially (not rhetorically or metaphorically) perform, and that the paradigm of performance offers a promising framework for rethinking human-plant relations.”²³ They also note that they “are conscious of J.L. Austin’s understanding of performativity as a form of speech that actuates something and should not be appraised as true or false” and propose that “the implications

14 Ryan 2017.

15 Hall 2011.

16 Marder 2013.

17 Braidotti 2017.

18 Alaimo 2010.

19 Vieira, Gagliano, Ryan 2015: vxiii.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Vieira, Gagliano, Ryan 2015, note 32, xxiv.

of Austin's position for critical plant studies would be an intriguing addition to the field."²⁴

Here, I am not taking up that challenge, although I endorse their broad understanding of performance. Another way of understanding the way plants perform could be by referring to Karen Barad's (2007) understanding of performance as an ongoing activity in and of the world, or by proposing "appearing together" as a way of performing with plants.²⁵

(3) Plants not only perform; they could be understood as speaking, too, for example with the help of volatile chemicals, as suggested in "Speaking in Chemical Tongues – Decoding the Language of plant Volatiles" by Raguso and Kessler in the anthology *The Language of Plants – Science, Philosophy, Literature*.²⁶ In the introduction the editors discuss the language of plants from both extrinsic and intrinsic perspectives. Extrinsic language "includes the scientific language about plants ..., the philosophical language deployed to articulate the particularities of plant ontology, and the representation of vegetality in literary works."²⁷ Intrinsic language "encompasses the modes of communication and articulation used by vegetal species to negotiate ecologically with their biotic and abiotic environments."²⁸ Examples include "the language of biochemistry – plant hormones, electrical signalling, pressure cues, and so on... their olfactory bouquets..., or their aural enunciations revealed in the emergent field of bioacoustics."²⁹ Moreover, they involve "the ecological interactions between plants and animals, soil micro-organisms, and the environment, where "language", inclusively conceived mediates these exchanges."³⁰ In order to understand or speak such intrinsic languages I would need more specialized knowledge, while my letter to the pine remains on an extrinsic level and is thus clearly human-centred.

(4) Not only are plants experts of site-specificity, they are the true creators of our world. According to philosopher Emanuele Coccia plants "embody the most direct and elementary connection that life can establish with the world."³¹ As he points out "[o]ne cannot separate the plant – *neither physically nor metaphysically* – from the world that accommodates it."³² Plants exemplify "the most intense, radical and paradigmatic form of being in the world."³³ "[I]n their history and evolution", plants "demonstrate that living beings produce the space in which they live rather than being forced to adapt to it."³⁴ "They have modified the metaphysical structure of the world for good."³⁵ Moreover, by "making possible a world of which they are both part and content, plants destroy the topological hierarchy that seems to reign over our cosmos" Coccia contends, and by doing so "demonstrate that life is a rupture in the asymmetry between container and contained."³⁶ He asserts: "When there is life, the container is located in the contained (and is thus contained by it); and vice versa."³⁷ With the example of breathing this paradox becomes understandable; we are immersed in the air we breathe as we contain it, and also exchange it with all the other things that breathe, including trees.

24 Ibid.

25 Arlander 2019a, 457-459.

26 Gagliano, Ryan, Vieira 2017, 27-61.

27 Gagliano et al. 2017, xvii.

28 Ibid.

29 Gagliano et al. 2017, xvii-xviii.

30 Gagliano et al. 2017, xviii.

31 Coccia 2019, 5.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Coccia 2019, 10.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

(5) In writing letters to trees by the trees I am participating in their breath. I made other videos with the same pine tree that I was writing a letter to, *On the Edge* and *On the Edge I-III*, which can be viewed on the Research Catalogue.³⁸ Images of performances for camera with other pines on Öro are documented on the project blog under the heading “Öres”.³⁹ With the exception of *The Pine's Apprentice*, which was a daily performance, most of the sessions with the pine trees were short poses, and several of them included writing, such as *Day with a Pine* (in English), *Writing in a Pine* (in Swedish) *Dear Pine* (in Finnish) *Kära tall (Another Day with a Pine)* (in Swedish) and *Pines by the Path (Kära tall)* (in Swedish). In January and February 2021, I returned to Öro again, and did some more writing with pines, in *Tala om det för Tallen (Tell it to the Pine) 1 and 2*, *Dearest Pine (with text)*, and *Esteemed Pine Tree*. Writing letters to trees with the trees or next to them has become a way of being together with them. The role of the camera as a witness is crucial, however; I rarely write letters to trees without performing the action for camera. The encounter is important as an experience, the letter forms a trace of the performance, but the real purpose of the practice is the resulting video work.

(6) Writing letters to trees developed from attempts at using text as the sound in videos with trees. After adding diary notes to videos, for example in the video *Sunday with a Pine* (2017) I wrote a voice-over text where I addressed the tree that I had been performing with directly for *Hanging in a Pine* (2019), albeit only at the end of the text. The first full letter to a tree I wrote as a voice-over to the video work *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jan's Wood (Sitting in a Pine)* (2019) after performing with it repeatedly for a year, as a kind of explanation how the work was made, and the text has also been published separately.⁴⁰ The first letter to a tree written next to the tree, as a performance for camera, performing writing as an action, was written to and with an ancient Olive tree in Ulldecona in Spain in December 2019, later published as a video essay.⁴¹ And the first letter written to a tree with the tree, where the text was recorded and added to the video depicting the writing, albeit in an abbreviated version, was addressed to a firethorn rhus in Nirox Sculpture Park in South-Africa in March 2020. This practice of writing to trees with the trees as performances for camera I have since been exploring in various places, in Stockholm (with a pine on Hundudden), in Helsinki (with a pine in Brunnsparcken and a spruce on Harakka Island), with several trees in Mustarinda in north-eastern Finland and with many pines on Öro island, as mentioned before.⁴²

(7) An earlier practice of giving voice to trees in small monologues forms a background to this letter writing. *Trees Talk* is a series of small site-specific audio plays or recorded monologues, based on the Celtic tree calendar, which I have made with or for trees in various locations since 2003. They are documented in the exposition “Talking Trees” on the RC.⁴³ The problem of performing as trees, assuming the role of trees, I have discussed in a text called “Performing with Trees”⁴⁴ as well as in the collection *Performing Landscape*.⁴⁵ The cultural phenomenon or figure of talking trees is discussed by Michael Marder, who criticises a narrow way of identifying speech as vocalisation⁴⁶. According to him talking trees are nevertheless “the conduits to another possible relation to plants”

³⁸ Arlander 2020f.

³⁹ Arlander 2020g.

⁴⁰ Arlander 2020c.

⁴¹ Arlander 2021.

⁴² Arlander 2020g.

⁴³ Arlander 2003.

⁴⁴ Arlander 2010, 160-162.

⁴⁵ Arlander 2012, 191-213.

⁴⁶ Marder 2017, 112-113.

because they are “perceived no longer as mute objective surfaces for the inscription of meaning that has originated outside them but as nonhuman subjects in their own right.”⁴⁷

(8) Not only is speaking as trees problematic but speaking for trees is tricky as well. In “The Problem of Speaking for Others” Linda Alcoff notes, however, that a retreat to speak only for oneself is not a solution. “We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also.”⁴⁸ She explains: “When I speak for my-self, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that to others, whether I intend to or not, as one possible way to be.”⁴⁹ According her “[i]t is an illusion that I can separate from others to such an extent that I can avoid affecting them.”⁵⁰ Alcoff refers to the influential text by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where Spivak suggests that “to promote ‘listening to’” as opposed to speaking for essentializes the oppressed as nonideologically constructed subjects⁵¹ and “prefers a ‘speaking to’, in which the intellectual neither abnegates his or her discursive role nor presumes an authenticity of the oppressed”⁵² but rather “allows for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a “countersentence” that can then suggest a new historical narrative.”⁵³ Alcoff suggests as a possible strategy “to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others.”⁵⁴ Perhaps this could be extended to relations with trees as well. What their “countersentences” would be, is hard to imagine, but not impossible.

Referring to Spivak, in her text “*Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing*” Patricia Vieira asks ““Can the Plant Speak?”” and if so, “Would we be prepared to listen?” “Or would we rather” she adds, “as Spivak warned in the case of the subaltern, superimpose our thoughts, reasoning, and preconceived ideas, perhaps even in a well-intentioned manner, onto the plant?”⁵⁵ Despite problems with the analogy, “the similarities between the subaltern and the plant are also striking”⁵⁶ she notes. “Relegated to the margins of Western thought, both categories have been posited as the negative images of modernity’s triumphant ideals.”⁵⁷ Vieira suggests that “following in the footsteps of postcolonial studies, we make an effort to interpret the stories of plants”, although “this is a challenging endeavour.”⁵⁸ She proposes “the notion of inscription as a possible bridge over the abyss separating humans from the plant world” because “all beings inscribe themselves in their environment and in the existence in those who surround them.”⁵⁹ Although it seems that the human who writes to the pines is doing the inscription, following this line of thought we could also see the trees inscribing themselves onto the thoughts of the human and the text emerging in the encounter. This possibility I have discussed in another context.⁶⁰

(9) Speaking with trees or writing next to trees seems like one possible solution to the

47 Marder 2017, 115.

48 Alcoff 1992, 21.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Spivak quoted in Alcoff 1992, 22.

52 Spivak quoted in Alcoff 1992, 23.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Vieira 2017, 216-217.

56 Vieira 2017, 217.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Arlander 2022.

problem of addressing trees. In a conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha Nancy Chen asks about the relationship between “talking nearby instead of talking about” and indirect speech. Minh-Ha elaborates on indirect speech as “a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place”,⁶¹ but rather “reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” and “whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition”.⁶² For Minh-Ha “these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language”⁶³ She notes, however, that to say, “that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge, ...not just a technique or a statement” but rather “an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world.”⁶⁴ And I wonder whether I have really understood the width of the challenge – how to relate to others respectfully and with empathy, including trees.

(10) In an attempt at reconfiguring our relationship to the world and to other life forms cohabiting it with us, Rosi Braidotti brings in the idea of *zoe* to complement the human centred *bios*. Her “vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portions of life... traditionally ... reserved for Anthropos, that is to say *bios*” and “the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*.”⁶⁵ “*Zoe* is the ruling principle” is one of her theses for a posthuman feminism. She proposes “a species egalitarianism” resting on a relational ontology based on “a monistic, neo-Spinozist vital materialist philosophy”⁶⁶ and notes how “a *zoe*- or geocentered approach requires a mutation of our understanding of *what it means to think and speak at all* (italics mine), let alone think critically.”⁶⁷ This shift opens up a possibility to consider pine trees, for example, as relevant interlocutors, but does not make the attempt at conversation any easier. For Braidotti “[t]he dynamic, self-organizing structure of life as *zoe* stands for generative vitality, [which] is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains.”⁶⁸ Moreover, “[*z*]*oe*-centered egalitarianism” means for her “a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic transspecies commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism.”⁶⁹ Although writing to trees with trees is very far from *zoe*-centred egalitarianism, it is nevertheless an attempt at approaching other lifeforms in a respectful if not fully egalitarian manner.

(11) Another aspect of equality is the way we are all exposed to and immersed in the various compounds surrounding us and traversing us. In exploring “the contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” Stacy Alaimo imagines “human corporeality as transcorporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and “underlines the extent to which the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’.”⁷⁰ Such an understanding prevents us from posing “nature as mere background... since ‘nature’ is always as close as one’s own skin – perhaps even closer.”⁷¹ For her “the environment... is in fact a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims and actions.”⁷² In focusing on “movement

61 Chen 1992, 87.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Braidotti 2017, 32.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Alaimo 2010, 2.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures” and in “underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites”, trans-corporeality “acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents and other actors.”⁷³ Moreover, Alaimo suggests that “[e]mphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world – and at the same time *acknowledging that material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies* (italics mine) – allows us to forge ethical and political positions” which can help us contend with contemporary precarities “in which ‘human’ and ‘environment’ can by no means be considered as separate.”⁷⁴ Such epistemologies should be able to include the wisdom of other-than- human beings, like pine trees, and to downplay human superiority in relation to the rest of nature.

(12) The most common stories of human “relationships” with nature are summarized by Michael Pollan in *The Botany of Desire*: “There’s the old heroic story, where Man is at war with Nature; the romantic version, where Man merges spiritually with Nature (usually with some help from the pathetic fallacy)” he writes, “and, more recently, the environmental morality tale, in which Nature pays Man back for his transgressions, usually in the coin of disaster”.⁷⁵ He reminds us that all of these narratives “share a premise we know to be false but can’t seem to shake: that we somehow stand outside, or apart from, nature.”⁷⁶ The pathetic fallacy mentioned by Pollan is discussed by John Ryan, who takes up the problem or stigma related to it in his text “In the Key of Green – The Silent Voices of Plants in Poetry”⁷⁷. The term was coined by John Ruskin, a nineteenth century British art critic, who considered it morbid “to describe the attribution of feeling, emotion and sentience to so-called inanimate nature”.⁷⁸ Ryan suggests that “the voices of plants (their *internal* voices, produced by them) should be distinguished from the giving voice to plants (their *external* voices, imposed upon or granted to them by us).”⁷⁹ He proposes “a middle ground” with “plants speaking for themselves, in which they express their voices in myriad ways as we present to them (and ourselves) the appropriate conditions for doing so (such as unfragmented habitat, pollinators, sunshine, respect).”⁸⁰ He thinks of these “two modes of plant voice as dialogic sides of the same grape vine” where “speaking for plants in poetry, as an act informed by their ecological and material realities” would be “more ethically inflected than not writing anything from their perspectives, or worse yet, objectifying them in language.”⁸¹ One could nevertheless ask how well informed of the realities of the pine trees I should be in order to be able to write to them or with them in a such a manner.

(13) Perhaps the most classic description of a human relationship to a tree is presented by philosopher Martin Buber. He uses a tree as an example when describing his idea of an I-Thou relationship in contrast to an objectifying relationship to something as an it: “I consider a tree. I can look on it as a picture... I can perceive it as movement... I can classify it in a species”, he writes. “I subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognise it only as an expression

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Pollan 2001, xxv.

76 Ibid.

77 Ryan 2017.

78 Ryan 2017, 277.

79 Ryan 2017, 282.

80 Ibid.

81 Ryan 2017, 283.

of law... I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number.”⁸² “In all this the tree remains my object”⁸³, he adds, and presents the alternative: “It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it.”⁸⁴ If that happens, “[t]he tree is now no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.”⁸⁵ Buber stresses that “it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree” because “[t]he tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.”⁸⁶ He concludes: “Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.”⁸⁷ How the mutuality is realised, how a meeting or encounter resembling a dialogue could take place, is harder to fathom. Will the letter inevitably remain a monologue?

(14) In line with Buber, philosopher Erazim Kohak asks in his text “Speaking to Trees”: “What is the epistemological status of a world within which speaking to trees would appear as an appropriate behavior?”⁸⁸ He proposes “a world perceived as a community of autonomous beings worthy of respect”, in contrast “with the anthropocentric conception of the world as a value-free reservoir of raw materials” although, according to him “neither worldview can or should claim descriptive accuracy.”⁸⁹ For Kohak they are “equally ‘manners of speaking’ and the choice between them must rest on whether they are conducive to ecologically constructive or ecologically destructive behavior.”⁹⁰ On such grounds “speaking to trees is a legitimate, speaking of biomechanisms an illegitimate form of verbal behavior”,⁹¹ he adds. “When a philosopher and a tree converse, what do they talk about?”⁹² Kohak asks. At the end of his argument, he provides an answer: “The point of speaking to a tree is communication. In recognizing the tree as part of a community of discourse, we are shaping acts and attitudes.”⁹³ Considering “trees as mute and impersonal biomechanisms has brought us to the verge of an environmental catastrophe” and what is needed “is to generate a manner of speaking which would be true to the task of sustainable dwelling at peace for humans and the world alike”, he adds. We need “a manner of speaking that would be true in the non-descriptive sense of being good” that is “the truth they speak about when a philosopher speaks with a tree.”⁹⁴ Considered from this perspective writing letters to pine trees is an attempt at generating new manners of speaking, new gestures of acknowledgement, new communities of discourse.

(15) Our connection with trees is not only a question of a manner of speaking, however. We share a common ancestry; LUCA, the Last Universal Common Ancestor of all life on earth, which I first heard mentioned by professor of molecular biology Howy Jacobs in 2017⁹⁵, unites me and the pine trees as well as all life forms on earth, however much they are differentiated and keep differentiating. “Plants have not just evolved; they

82 Buber 1937, 7.

83 Ibid.

84 Buber 1937, 8.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Kohak 1992, 371.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Kohak 1992, 386.

94 Ibid.

95 The keynote “Life – A Tree with Three Intertwined Branches” was presented at the Aboagora – Between Arts and Sciences Symposium, in Turku, 24 August 2017. The recording of the speech is available online. (Jacobs 2017).

have involved themselves in the lives of every other being on the planet” Natasha Myers writes in “Are the Trees Watching us?”⁹⁶ They have been “concocting elixirs, poisons, fibres, and all forms of deliciousness, in responsive relation with other plants, animals, insects, microbes, and fungi,” and they probably “have a deeper awareness of the world around them than we ever will”⁹⁷, she adds. Myers suggests that one way “we can learn to appreciate just how the trees are watching us is to begin to vegetalise our sensoria, reworking our perceptions with planty attentions.”⁹⁸ According to her “our senses of taste, smell, colour, texture, and form are already all shaped by our involutory becoming alongside plants.”⁹⁹ Humans have evolved together with plants and bodies of all kinds, including pine trees. Writing letters to trees might not be the best way of vegetalising our sensoria, although that is one way to begin, a tool to focus attention. Simply to spend some time with trees would probably work as well, perhaps even better than writing letters, as a starting point for engaging in a discourse of sorts, breathing together with them, next to them, watching, listening, sensing and smelling, allowing them to watch you – engaging in trans-corporeal exchanges, enjoying our joint participation in *zoe*. Thus, by way of conclusion, I would simply like to add: Please do try this at home, with a pine nearby or any other tree that invites you to join them.

EPILOGUE

As the above notes hopefully made clear, the act of addressing a tree, of writing a letter to a tree together with the tree, next to or nearby the tree, is conceptually no simple matter. Besides the question of address, of speaking to or with a tree, there are other problems that could and should be addressed, like what do we mean by a tree, what does to perform for camera entail etc. There are other discourses that should be considered, like the concern regarding anthropocentrism in addressing a tree. And there are problems left unexamined, such as: why is the camera needed as a witness? Why make a record of the performance, an artwork for humans? Why is the tree as audience not sufficient? The notes above refer to the thoughts that occurred to me at the moment of writing, based on ideas I had recently encountered or read, and, as I would like to think but cannot verify, the ideas perhaps suggested to me by the pine tree as well, or the “it thinks” between us. At the very least they demonstrate, how in artistic practice, artistic research and performance as research seemingly contradictory notions can coexist and nourish the work.

It is time to return to the question we began with, whether personifying the tree, addressing the tree as an audience and engaging in a decidedly human activity like writing actually neglects to foreground our shared participation in *zoe*, in life beyond the human. Based on my experience with this letter I suggest that personifying or subjectifying trees is a useful tool to explore and does not deny a broader processual view. Rosi Braidotti’s distinction between antropomorphism and anthropocentrism might be useful here. Although life “is *zoe* driven and geocentered,”¹⁰⁰ according to her, for us as humans “it will always be anthropomorphic, that is to say, embedded and embodied, enfolded, affective, relational.”¹⁰¹ Only “by embracing resiliently our anthropomorphic frame and

⁹⁶ Myers 2020 n.p.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Braidotti 2017, 34.

¹⁰¹ Braidotti 2017, 35.

the limits and possibilities it entails” can we “become creatively *zoe*-centered.”¹⁰² “Living matter”, she writes, “is intelligent and self-organizing . . . precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life.”¹⁰³ Following this line of thought I should be able to acknowledge the agency and subjectivity of a pine tree while utilizing my human sensibilities and techniques in addressing the tree. While writing a letter to a tree and thus addressing plants as persons following Matthew Hall’s suggestion, even turning them into an audience, I can at the same time also acknowledge the vegetal dimension of my own subjectivity, as proposed by Michael Marder. Although these standpoints are philosophically contradictory, on an experiential level they need not be mutually excluding in practice. The same could be said about the contrast between personhood and trans-corporeality. I can respect the subjectivity and personal integrity of a human colleague as co-performer or spectator while being aware of the fact that she is constantly changing and conscious of the trans-corporeal exchange of microbes, viruses and more between us. The same should be possible with a tree. The act of addressing the tree as an audience by writing a letter to the tree in their presence does not have to function as an “othering”, if one maintains an awareness of the trans-corporeal flows taking place and of our shared, symbiotic relationship through breathing. That said, whether other techniques than writing or other ways to relate besides addressing as audience would better serve to foreground our common participation in *zoe* remains to be explored.

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¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Braidotti 2017, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Arlander 2020 c project blog <https://meetingswithtrees.com>.

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