

Visiting a Tree

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Working at the periphery of a discipline, often means the intersection of several fields, an in-between position, which can be at the same time central and marginal. In artistic terms such areas would in my case be performance art, environmental art and media art and the intersection between them. In terms of cultural studies such fields could be performance-as-research and performance studies, critical plant studies and environmental posthumanities or feminist new materialism and even media studies. As with interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary endeavours in general, this position can be problematic as well. What is marginal, exceptional and therefore interesting in one field can be basic, boring and commonly known in another. Being interested in issues, which are at the periphery of performance art, might mean dealing with mainstream issues of visual studies, and so on. And moving from one area or field to another is more difficult than one would imagine. Moving from theatre, via performance art to moving image in visual art has taken me twenty years and I am still often placed 'in-between'.

Performing with Plants, an artistic research project funded by the committee for artistic research at the Swedish Research Council, might seem utterly peripheral to the core concerns of visual, performance or media art. Due to the climate crisis, the debates concerning post-humanities and biopolitics, and the flourishing of critical plant studies in the wake of animal studies, this marginal interest is suddenly placed close to the heart of current concerns. How can we perform with plants is a question of utmost interest, and not only, or even mainly in terms of art.

In this text I am going to present one part of the project – hanging and swinging from a specific pine tree in Stockholm during the year 2018 – using my blog posts from the beginning of that practice as material, and focus on some of the smaller or larger ethical dilemmas involved.

The project Performing with Plants explores the possibility of performing or posing repeatedly for camera together with trees, and can be linked to “art’s return to vegetal life”, the reference the subtitle of Prudence Gibson’s recent book *The Plant Contract* (Gibson 2018) and the current “plant turn” in science, philosophy and environmental humanities described for instance by anthropologist Natasha Myers (2017). In the emerging field of “critical plant studies” (Gibson & Brits 2018) several recent books are looking at plants and art (Gibson 2018; Aloï 2018). I am clearly not alone in my interest for working with the vegetal. Despite the flourishing scientific research into plant sentience, however, and the popular attention on the topic, there is no way for me as a performer to know what a tree wants, on anything but a very general level. How then to perform with plants in a reasonably ethical manner?

Working with urban nature or natureculture, to use Haraway’s term, often means dealing with the peripheral also in a literal sense, strolling at the outskirts of a city, in parks, wastelands or recreational forests. In this case I have visited two spruce stumps and two pine trees in the centre of Stockholm, in Lill-Jansskogen, a small feral forest near the campus of Royal Institute of Technology, a place that is in itself a suitable example of the peripheral

in the centre. The area is well frequented by runners and walkers with or without dogs and I have rarely been there alone. The hilly woods are maintained in a seemingly unkempt condition with lots of dead trees left lying to serve a variety of species, at the same time as the path is lined with street lights to help runners and walkers keep up with their training all year. I chose this area for my practice mainly because it is right next to DOCH – the Dance and Circus School of University of the Arts Stockholm, where I have been based during 2018.

As sessile beings, plants are sensitive to place, their life is literally site-specific. We could say that trees are the experts of site-specificity in their manner of adapting to circumstances. And, as philosopher Michael Marder points out: “All radically contextual thought is an inheritor of vegetal life.” (Marder 2013, 169) One way to perform with sessile beings like trees, respecting their specific sense of time and space, is to visit them repeatedly, as I have done in several projects on Harakka Island, in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki, and lately in Stockholm. In 2017 I visited a beech at the Djurgården shore and a sycamore in Humlegården park approximately twice a month; the spruces and pines in 2018 I have visited more regularly, often three times a week, except when traveling. Sitting on spruce stumps was partly inspired by my experience of sitting on an alder stump in Helsinki the previous year, as a sculptural gesture of sorts, and partly by the tragic appearance of the huge dead spruce trunk still attached to a stump next to the path. The pine tree I chose to sit in during the year 2018 is very small, but the one I was hanging from and swinging in is tall and strong. Each visit is documented with still images from the videos on the project website.¹

In working with pine trees, I was influenced by my experiences in Nida Art Colony in September 2017, where I tried to rest with various pine trees covering the area.² In hanging from a pine tree repeatedly for a year, my main aim was to further develop the work I did during the previous year of the dog, in 2006 and 2007 on Harakka Island and in Kalvola. In *Year of the Dog – Sitting in a Tree* (2007)³ I sat in a pine tree on Harakka Island once a week from 7 January 2006 to 11 February 2007. And in *Year of the Dog Calendar*⁴ I was hanging from and leaning against an old pine tree in Kalvola once a month during the year 2006 (except for the month of April, which I recorded the following year, in 2007). The idea of swinging from the branch of the pine was a development of my swinging experiments in previous years, starting with *Year of the Snake - Swinging Along*⁵ in 2014, albeit this time without a swing. Swinging can relatively easily be edited into a continuous movement, which supports the flow from one image to the next. The swinging and hanging sessions recorded in 2018 I edited to show as a preview at the conference, although there were still a few more sessions to be recorded in January 2019. I began my practice in February, at the Chinese New Year, so of course I had to continue till the end of the Chinese year, that is, until February 2019.

¹ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/410491>

² The work is discussed in Arlander 2019.

³ <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-dog-sitting-in-a-tree/>

⁴ <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-dog-in-kalvola-calendar/>

⁵ <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-along/>

In a blog post on my personal website I wrote in English on the 14th of February with the title “New Trees to Work with in Stockholm”⁶:

The wood behind DOCH (Dans och Cirkus högskolan, School of Dance and Circus), where I have my working place these days, is part of Norra Djurgården (The Northern Djurgården Park) but unofficially called Lill-Jansskogen. I have been walking around there, along the various paths, looking for a nice tree to sit in, preferably a pine, but have not had much success in finding a suitable one. The wood is fascinating because it is deliberately left rather feral with lots of dead trees, and the terrain is rather varied as well. After making some excursions in the area I finally decided, on the eve of the Chinese New Year, to just make up a round for myself as near as possible to my base, with some stops on the way, something easy to repeat, if not daily, at least weekly. I wanted to begin a series of images to be repeated during the year of the dog – partly because I had missed the chance to begin at the ordinary new year – and to revisit my actions during the year of the dog twelve years earlier. At that time, I was sitting in a pine tree on Harakka Island, lying on the rocks as the shadow of a small pine at the shore and also visiting an old pine tree in Kalvola about 100 km north of Helsinki, hanging from its branch and leaning on its trunk, although only once a month.

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Since sitting in a tree, or on a tree, or with a tree was the main action I was engaged with during the first year of my artistic research project *Performing with Plants*, which I am now continuing with in Stockholm, that seemed like an easy choice to go on with. But, of course you want to find the right partner if you are going to commit yourself to a collaboration for a whole year. And nothing seemed really inviting or seducing or inspiring in any way. To simply get started I decided to make a try-out, and to begin with the stump of a recently felled old spruce, which had caught my eye during my walks, to sit on the stump as my first stop, and to continue from there. Moreover, I thought I would perhaps make do with some of the small pines on the hill right next to the building, since they were growing conveniently right there. So, the day before new moon I took my camera and chose these four stops: Sitting with the tragic corpse of the spruce... Resting in the corner of the fairy tale forest... Swinging on the branch of an old pine on the hill... And finally, sitting in, on, with or amongst a small pine by the path. These four actions and four images, two with spruces and two with pines, are all very different in atmosphere, but I was rather happy with making these choices without further ado. This was a beginning...

⁶ <https://annetearlander.com/2018/02/14/new-trees-to-work-with-in-stockholm/>



First stop, sitting with the tragic corpse of the spruce...



Second stop, resting in the corner of the fairy tale forest...



Third stop, swinging on the branch of an old pine on the hill...



Fourth stop, sitting in, on, with a small pine by the path.

In the second blog post where I describe my visits, written in Swedish on the Stockholm blog⁷ I repeat some of the same details:

Now it has started, the year of the dog 2018. According the Chinese Calendar the new year will begin at the new moon between 21 January and 20 February, which this year is on the 16th of February and will continue until the 4th February 2019. And now I have begun a project that I will continue with during this year of the dog. It was actually a coincidence that I resorted to the Chinese Calendar again, because last year, in 2017, I followed the usual Western calendar to frame my repeated visits with

⁷ <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/2018/02/16/begynnelsen-pa-hundens-ar/>

a video camera to two trees in Helsinki (a group of elm trees and an alder stump) and two trees in Stockholm (a sycamore in Humlegården and a beech at the Djurgården shore). But this year I was late with the beginning at new year and wanted also to link to the year of the dog in 2006-2007 when I sat in a pine tree on Harakka island once a week and visited an old pine tree in Kalvola in southern Finland once a month.

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My plan was to find a dwarf pine tree with thick and low-growing branches, easy to climb up in, but that was easier said than done in the center of Stockholm. Behind the Royal Institute of Technology and the Dance and Cirkus School of Stockholm University of the Arts, my current working place, there is the Northern Djurgården Park and Lill-Jansskogen, and despite being rather feral, with plenty of dead trees, rocks and bushes, most of the pine trees are tall and straight and there are plenty of large spruces between the deciduous trees. A few dwarf pine trees grow on the hill right next to the school building, and they will have to do. On the 14th of February I made a test round and decided on two spruce stumps to sit on, the pine branch to swing from and the small shrub-like pine tree to sit in or with. Yesterday, on 15th February and today 16th February I made my round "for real" /--/. Already the changes in the amount of snow and in the light during two days are fascinating, let's see how it will turn out with the seasons. Although the winter is often more interesting because the snow is so graphic.

Two points of this practice are worth emphasizing, namely the idea of repeated visits and the idea of visiting the plants in the place where they grow. This is not so special regarding trees, which would be hard to move around. In the context of plant art, however, vegetal growth is often used as material for various types of art works in galleries or museums, or prepared in laboratories or hothouses. Within critical plant studies ethical issues in dealing with plants are frequently discussed.

By visiting trees at their sites of growth one does not escape all ethical problems. Think of the choice to sit on a spruce stump; if I really would regard trees as living beings, sitting on a corpse for a year would be rather weird. As an example of the ethical dilemmas during the process of swinging in the pine tree a case in point is the broken branch, which I described in a blog post on 17 March with the title "Shock or surprise?"⁸

The second surprise, and a more dramatic one, almost a shock, awaited me on the top of the hill by the pine tree. Somebody had broken my swinging branch! Well, the pine's branch, that is, the branch I normally swing on and hang on was broken ... and the remains lay scattered on the ground... My first reaction was a rather paranoid one, that somebody had deliberately broken the branch to prevent me from continuing swinging on it, or even worse, in order to put a blame on me for hurting or damaging the tree. I immediately realized this was a rather far-fetched idea, and examined the broken branch. I could still hang on it as usual; what exactly had happened? Pieces of the branch were lying on the ground as if after a battle. Could it be that somebody had looked at the images online and then wanted to try swinging themselves, but had grabbed the branch too far away near the tip, rather than close

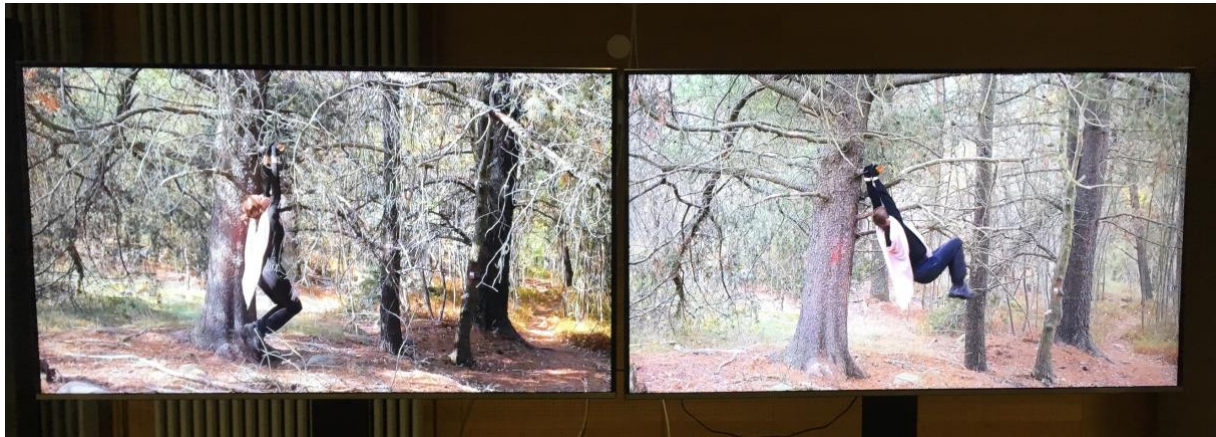
⁸ <https://artisticresearchinstockholm.wordpress.com/2018/03/17/shock-or-surprise/>

to the trunk? Not very likely, but somebody might have seen my repeated footsteps by the tree and therefore decided to try it out, but was much heavier than me, or was careless with the branch. That is perhaps the most likely explanation, but in each case, I have some ethical responsibility for what happened. Although the broken branch would not influence my practice in any catastrophic way I felt deeply sad for the accident and somehow responsible for it.

This type of real damage is not that unlikely. By climbing into the little pine tree, I tried to balance my weight on several branches, but some dry twigs would necessarily break because of my clumsiness. When speaking of ethical dilemmas, to try to avoid harming or hurting your collaborator is perhaps the main thing to begin with.

Other types of ethical-aesthetical dilemmas awaited while editing. Usually I include all the images in the order they have been recorded, without censoring anything. But what if I want to synchronise the swinging and the hanging images? If the hanging image from one session in the beginning is very short, should I skip that session and the equivalent session of swinging, too? Or should I perhaps extend the previous and next session of hanging to cover the equivalent session of swinging, or what? With one of the last sessions I had the problem of missing the video clips. I had uploaded the video stills on the blog and in the project archive, but the actual video clips were nowhere to be found (and nowhere here means all my extra hard drives). Obviously, I had destroyed them by mistake, and edited a version where a still image was inserted as a placeholder of sorts. That works quite well as an accent in the swinging image, but seems meaningless in the hanging version. There is no “right” choice to be made...

Another ethical-aesthetical dilemma, with wider repercussions, is the balance between the human performer and the tree. The human clearly dominates in these examples and serves as the measure for the framing. Moreover, movement tends to draw attention. There is a difference in degree of dominance between the hanging and the swinging images. As a colleague expressed it, the hanging images could be read as an attempt to join in some kind of “nature time”, while the swinging images clearly form a break or an intervention in the time of the tree. When thinking of how to combine the two actions in an installation my initial impulse was to begin with the hanging images on the left and continue with the stronger movement on the right. On the day of my presentation in Rovaniemi a two-channel installation of the test edits of the videos were shown in two monitors next to each other in the entrance hall of University of Lapland.



Two-channel installation of test edits.

When I saw the videos I immediately realised it made more sense to begin with the stronger movement and continue with the hanging, to create a development towards stillness. And it was not necessary to synchronise the images; on the contrary, the multiple differences were more interesting, as long as the total duration was the same and the seasons were somehow compatible. These principles I used in editing the final version completed in February 2019, here included as a split screen video called *Swinging-Hanging in a Pine*.



Swinging-Hanging in a Pine (2019)

<https://vimeo.com/319487015>

To return to the two points worth emphasizing, namely the idea of repeated visits and the idea of visiting the plants in the place where they grow, and to ethical dilemmas: Regarding both actions, swinging and hanging in the pine, repeatedly, one could also ask, in what way am I really performing “with” the plant here? Or am I rather using or appropriating the pine tree as my structural support, as the backdrop for my performance, as my “site”? Am I utilizing or exploiting the situatedness of the pine tree to situate myself? Or, could my use of the pine tree be understood as simply seeking the help of the pine tree in experiencing the site? - Sure, we are also performing together in terms of exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide and all other chemicals we share through our different ways of breathing. But that is perhaps another question...

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