

## **Performing with Pines and Spruces**

Annette Arlander

How to develop and depict our relationship to trees; how to practice or perform such a relationship, within contemporary urban life? In the Nordic countries the popular warning, not to see the forest for the trees, could be reversed; we tend to neglect the trees and focus on the forest, often for profit. Despite the necessity of thinking in terms of ecosystems, approaching individual trees might be a way to increase the understanding of our shared participation in zoe (Braidotti 2017), to imagine a planthropocene (Myers 2014). A post-humanist perspective prompts us to realize that the landscape or environment consists of life forms and phenomena with differing degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements, like singular trees, and explore what to do together with them. In an artistic research project “Performing with plants” at the Stockholm University of the Arts Research Centre I have visited two spruce stumps and two pine trees in Lill-jansskogen, a wood near the city center, regularly during the year 2018. Posing with them repeatedly for a video camera on tripod, I have explored what it could mean to perform with trees, trying to respect their sense of place and time. In this presentation I will show some clips of the material, and contextualize them within the current interest in critical plant studies and “art’s return to vegetal life” (Gibson 2018; Aloï 2018).

A core challenge evoked by the current interest in the notion Anthropocene, is exactly this: how to relate to other beings and entities that we share this planet with. And in terms of performance: how to perform with, include, or at least acknowledge the contribution of other beings than humans in our performances. Despite the flourishing research into plant sentience and the popular attention on the topic, there is a lack of studies on plants and performance. There is no way for a performer to know what a tree wants on anything but a very general level. How then to perform with plants and contribute to the development of something like a planthropocene (Myers 2017), a livable future for humans and plants?

Big old trees are traditionally venerated almost everywhere in Europe, and probably elsewhere as well. This is exemplified for example with the Celtic tree alphabet and the so-

called Celtic tree calendar, where each lunar month is designated to one tree, which I have worked with, but will not go into now.

In Finland, Ritva Kovalainen and Sanni Seppo have compiled the popular book *Puiden kansa, Tree People*, with sayings and stories about old trees in Finnish folklore. There are at present heated debates regarding the increase of the production of cellulose versus maintaining forests as carbon sinks. According one counting – they vary considerably of course, depending of type of tree and soil and climate – the growth of approximately 2,5 hectares of Finnish forest is needed to cover the carbon footprint of a Finn living in Southern part of the country.<sup>1</sup> According another account "a mature leafy tree produces as much oxygen in a season as 10 people inhale in a year."<sup>2</sup> Thus trees are our true allies, also in mitigating some of the disastrous effects of the Anthropocene.

To take another approach to trees and geological time, which I was not aware of when writing the proposal for this event: last week I had the opportunity to spend a day with one of the oldest trees in the world, Old Tjikko, a relatively small spruce tree, which grows on Fulufjället mountain in a national park in Sweden, not far from the Norwegian border. A large part of the spruce grows as a shrub along the ground, and it is these parts that have the amazing age of 9950 years according to carbon dating. The tree is a clone, that is new shoots grow from old roots. That would be something for the well-known photographer Beth Moon, who has spent 14 years photographing the oldest trees in the world.

Compared with Old Tjikko, the spruces and spruce stumps (that you see here in the background) that I have spent one year with, in the centre of Stockholm, are modest, indeed. This work is part of an artistic research project at Stockholm University of the Arts, funded by the Swedish Research Council, called **Performing with Plants**.

Rethinking our relationship to the environment is a central task for artists today. Artistic research can contribute through its capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. This project participates in the discussion by way of a) developing artistic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.maaseuduntulevaisuus.fi/ymparisto/helsinki%C3%A4isen-hiilijalanj%C3%A4ljen-sitomiseen-tarvitaan-2-5-mets%C3%A4hehtaarin-kasvu-1.207678>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-much-oxygen-does-one-tree-produce-606785>

practices and producing art works that can critically question existing conventions and habits in our relationship to the environment and b) by theoretically reflecting, based on practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees. The importance of the project rests ultimately on the importance of the plants themselves – they are producing the preconditions for oxygen-based life on the planet.

The most important questions explored by the project are: 1) How to collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants (trees and shrubs)? 2) How to further develop experiences from previous attempts at performing landscape? 3) How to create actions with plants, in which humans can be invited to participate and join in? An overarching research problem is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the current posthumanist and new materialist understanding of the environment? Or perhaps we should write ‘environment’ (Alaimo 2010), since the idea of a separable environment is actually part of the problem to be addressed. To designate certain parts of existence to serve as environment to humans is no longer automatically acceptable.

Many artists are aware of this dilemma and try to move beyond visual representation of landscape or vegetation; living plants are present in much contemporary art. Three examples involving coniferous trees, can serve to exemplify various approaches: Agnes Denes’ *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule* (1996) in Ylöjärvi, Finland, with 11000 planted pine trees, is an early example of a large-scale environmental rehabilitation project. Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video portrait of a single Spruce, *Horizontal* (2011), shows how our representational system is built to depict humans, and Marcus Maerder’s sonification of biological processes in *Trees: Pinus Sylvestris* (Maerder 2016) translates the suffering of a tree for human ears.

And historically speaking there is no lack of artistic engagement with plants, from vegetally inspired ornamentation on textiles, pottery and architecture to paintings, poems and science fiction stories of plants. Living plants are used as material in practices as divergent as garden design, floral arrangements and contemporary bio art.

As an artistic research project this endeavour differs from current artistic engagements with plants, which tend to be linked to bio art and engage the vegetal in laboratory circumstances, or to focus on making the vegetal processes perceptible for humans, for instance by sonification, like the above-mentioned work by Marcus Maeder’s or Terike Haapoja’s *Closed Circuit – Open Duration*. Another option is letting the plants perform, as with the upside-

down hung trees readjusting their growth in Natalia Jeremijenko's *Tree Logic*, or the trees drawing in Tuula Närhinen's *Windtracers*, or then inviting humans to perform for plants, as in the work by the research group *Dance for Plants*. Performing explicitly "with" plants, as Essi Kausalainen has done in several performances, can be exemplified by Spela Petric's *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis*, a bio art project with links to endurance performance, where the standing artists' shadow is imprinted on a square of growing watercress in a gallery space. Performing with plants in their own environment is undertaken by performers like the aerial dancer Anna Rubio, who is hanging in trees, and in community art projects like *Standing with the Saguaro*, where members of the public were invited to share their experiences of standing with a saguaro cactus in a national park in Arizona. More examples and a discussion of vegetal performativity, especially with regard to affect and touch, are discussed by Nicolic & Radulovic (2018).

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

A broader context for the project is the growing interest in plant studies, to some extent as a further development of the burgeoning of animal studies (Derrida 2002; Haraway 2008) and post-humanist thinking (Wolfe 2009; Braidotti 2013). Discussions have focused on plant rights (Hall 2011), plant philosophy or plant thinking (Marder 2013; Marder 2015; Marder and Irigaray 2016; Irigaray 2017), plant theory (Nealon 2016), the language of plants (Kranz, Schwan, Wittrock 2016; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017) and queer plants (Sandilands 2017). There is a current "plant turn" (Myers 2017) in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, with an abundance of popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence and communication (Chamovitz 2017; Mancuso & Viola 2015, Wohlleben 2016). An emerging field of critical plant studies (Gibson & Brits 2018) can be linked to 'art's return to vegetal life' (Gibson 2018) and to looking at plants in art (*Antennae* 2011; Aloï 2018). Discussions on plants and performance, however, are mostly linked to

ecology in broader terms<sup>3</sup>, with some exceptions like an interest in “vegetalized performance” (Nicolíć & Radulovic 2018), and some attempts at performing with trees, junipers, pines or thistles. (Arlander 2010; 2015; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a) There is no issue of *Performance Research* “On Plants”, or “On Vegetation”, yet, compared to the issues of the journal *Antennae* (2011) devoted to plants and art. One basic form of performing with plants is of course agriculture (Pollan 2002). And why not forestry, too.

We could distinguish several possible strategies when linking plants and performance – and most of these strategies could be extended to other life-forms like fungi, bacteria etc. If we begin with a restricted understanding of performance, where performers and spectators are easily distinguished, we have at least two options:

1. Plants perform for humans. This could take place simply in the display of flowers and fruits (Pollan 2002) in the sonification of their life processes<sup>4</sup>, or by trees drawing with the help of specific tools.<sup>5</sup>
2. Humans perform for plants. Besides the notorious examples of playing music for plants to increase their growth, there are less instrumental contemporary performance projects like *Dance for Plants*.

If we want to endorse a more theatrical understanding of performance, which often involves performing as somebody else, we can add two more strategies:

3. Humans perform as plants. Historical examples include Louis Fuller’s choreographies on floral themes.<sup>6</sup>
4. Plants perform as humans. Vegetation can act as material for sculptures of humans as in Mathilde Roussel’s *Lives of Grass*.

To these strategies, we can add a fifth category, that is “performing with”, which can be divided into several types depending on location:

5. Plants perform with humans.
  - a) In human spaces of display, like on stage or in a gallery. Examples abound: Essi Kausalainen performing with her house plants, or Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan performing with a bonsai in *Tree Duet*. (Davies 2011, 55). A provocative example

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *Performing Ethos*, Volume 5 (2014) or *Performance Research: On Ecology* (2012).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Marcus Maeder’s *Trees: Pinus Silvestris*.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Tuula Närhinen’s *Windtracers*.

<sup>6</sup> Such as *Violet* (1892), *The Flowers* (1893), and *Une Pluie de fleurs* (1898). (Schwan 2016, 271).

of collaboration is Spela Petric's endurance performance *Skotopoiesis*, where the shadow of the standing artist is slowly formed on growing water cress.

- b) In places where plants grow, like forests and fields. Aerial dancers like Anna Rubio perform with trees, activists live in trees to prevent them from being felled. (Philp 2018). In the participatory performance *Standing with the Saguaros*, audience members were invited to stand with a saguaro cactus in the desert, and to document their experiences. (Eisele 2014)
- c) Entangled as part of the same organism, as in some forms of bio art. An astounding example is the "plantimal" called *Edunia* by Eduarco Kac, a genetically engineered flower, a hybrid of the artist and a Petunia. (Kac 2011).

The examples of performing with plants that you see belong to category 5 b, performing with plants in places where they grow - and in a mundane, somewhat unspectacular manner. Concerning communication with the trees, in my performing with plants I am not attempting to communicate with them, to enter into a dialogue, to understand them or make myself understandable to them. Rather, I am trying to be aware of sharing the same time and space with them. By sitting in trees, or on tree stumps, as in this case, I try to explore how a "being with" or "becoming with", beyond language could visually take place.

The performances took place during the year 2018, the Chinese year of the dog, that is, between 16 February 2018 and 3 February 2019, in Lill-Jansskogen or Little Jan's Wood in the centre of Stockholm, between the campuses of the Royal Institute of Technology and Stockholm University. Four sites were visited repeatedly, two spruce stumps and two pine trees, sometimes three times a week. The performances were recorded by a video camera on tripod to be edited into rough time-lapse videos. Removing the entering and the exiting from the image creates an impression of a continuous action or pose. Two of these performances are here analysed, namely, sitting on the two spruce stumps, while encounters with the pine trees have been discussed elsewhere. (Arlander 2019b). At the first site I sat on an old spruce stump with the felled trunk still attached to it, relatively close to the camera. At the second site I sat on a small spruce stump on the ground among tall spruces, this time further away from the camera. In both performances I was wearing a pale pink woollen scarf and turning my back to the camera.

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

The most important performance, on the level of the Anthropocene, or planthropocene, is probably the exchange of oxygen, carbon dioxide and other chemicals that we perform, not only the spruces and me, but the rest of the surrounding vegetation as well. We could call them trans-corporeal exchanges, using the term coined by Stacy Alaimo (2010, 3). She understands “human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world”, and by doing that she “underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’.” (Alaimo 2010, 2). Trans-corporeality emphasizes “movement across bodies” and “reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures”. (Ibid) Alaimo notes that it is also helpful in cultivating “a tangible sense of connection to the material world in order to encourage an environmentalist ethos” and to counteract the tendency to disconnect and treat “‘environmental issues’ as containable, eccentric, dismissible topics.” (Alaimo 2010, 16).

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The problem of performing with plants could be considered via a dualistic world view, as an encounter with “the Other” that remains forever incomprehensible, beyond reach, irrevocably different and demanding our respect for that difference. There is no way to enter into a dialogue on equal footing with a spruce, even less with a spruce stump. Thinking of trees as such ultimate others is only one possibility, however. Recent scientific studies of plant behaviour and plant genetics have revealed that we share a lot of life processes with plants due to our common descent from one-cell organisms. Moreover, plants seem to have capacities earlier thought of as the sole capacity of humans, or later animals, like associative learning and some form of memory. (Mancuso & Viola 2015; Chamovitz 2017; Gagliano et al. 2017). Therefore, Rosi Braidotti’s monist Spinozist ontology, with a continuum between the human and the nonhuman, where differences are rhizomatic rather than dualistic, and her idea of *zoe* rather than *bios* as the ruling principle, makes more and more sense. The relationality with non-human entities is crucial here. However much we would think of ourselves as being a geological force, the masters and culprits of the obscene Anthropocene, the leading characters performing in a morbid spectacle, we are not the only ones involved.

The notion Planthropocene, proposed by anthropologist Natasha Myers (2018), is a reminder to put our self-importance into perspective and a useful complement to Braidotti’s “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” (2017) when we consider performing with plants. Myers notes that whether one locates the origin of the Anthropocene “at the invention of agriculture” or at “the ravages of colonialism”, with “the industrial revolution and the vast expansion of plantation agriculture and forms of accumulation by dispossession”, or links it to “petroculturalism’s extractive ‘exuberance’” or to “agriculture’s chemical and industrial revolutions”, all these have had “devastating consequences for both plants and their people.” (Myers 2017, 2). What she “half cheekily and half seriously” calls the Planthropocene, “is an aspirational episteme and way of doing life in which people come to recognize their profound interimplication with plants” (Myers 2017, 3). The Planthropocene “does not name a time-bound era”, (Ibid) but is rather “a call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings,” (Myers 2017, 4) she notes.

Although Myer’s focus is on gardens and garden design, her analysis is relevant for other performances with plants. “A well-tended garden, whether in a bucket or on board a space station, provides a stage for plants and people to perform their entangled powers.” (Myers 2017, 1) Gardens show “the various ways that *people stage relations with plants* – whether ...



intimate, extractive, violent, or instrumentalizing.” (Ibid) The same could be said of parks, woods and why not performances in parks, too. The examples discussed above could be recognized as intimate rather than violent or extractive, but they are nevertheless also instrumentalizing to some extent. Sitting on a spruce stump means using it as a supporting structure, and posing for a camera on tripod with it (without asking for consent) are both performances that utilize the stump or the plant in some manner, although trying to let them be as they are and where they are. There are no exchanges taking place comparable with gardening. Myers plays with the words ‘seen’, and ‘scene’ and “the ways some garden designs have the potential to stage both new scenes of, and new ways to see (and even seed)” (Myers 2017, 4). collaborations between people and plants. She is interested in attempts “*that stage livable futures for both plants and people.*” (Myers 2017, 3). Myers’ use of words like ‘staging’ prompts us to consider how this could be done in and with performance. And her explicit reminder that “*we are of the plants; that our futures hinge on creating liveable futures with the plants*” (Myers 2017, 3) might help us in remembering the importance of doing that.

#### **Links to artworks mentioned (not in references):**

Ahtila, Eija-Liisa: *Horizontal* [http://crystaleye.fi/eija-liisa\\_ahtila/installations/horizontal](http://crystaleye.fi/eija-liisa_ahtila/installations/horizontal)

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

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

<https://standingwithsaguaros.org>

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

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

Kausalainen, Essi <http://www.essikausalainen.com>

Närhinen, Tuula: *Windtracers* <http://www.tuulanarhinen.net/artworks/wind.htm>

Petric, Spela: *Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis* <http://www.spelapetric.org>

Roussel, Mathilde: *Lives of Grass* <https://anti-utopias.com/art/mathilde-roussel-lives-of-grass/>

Rubio, Anna: [http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/anna\\_rubio\\_all\\_the\\_trees\\_i\\_met](http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/anna_rubio_all_the_trees_i_met)

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