

Performing with plants - for a planthroposcene

(paper spoken in Dublin 9 June, except part III, skipped to save time)

Besides the feminist critique of the notion of the anthropocene (Alaimo 2016), there have been attempts at relating to the anthropocene in a constructive way (Braidotti in Grusin 2017). Of the various alternatives suggested, like capitalocene, chthulucene, (Haraway 2016) or even anthrobscene (Parikka 2015), the planthroposcene, proposed by Natasha Myers (2017) to indicate that humans need to recognize their deep interimplication with plants, is the one of most interest for this paper, which presents an artistic research project called 'Performing with plants'. The project explores the possibility of performing or posing repeatedly for camera together with trees in Stockholm, and can be linked to 'art's return to vegetal life' (Gibson 2018) and the current 'plant turn' (Myers 2017) in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, where in the wake of animal studies an emerging field of critical plant studies (Gibson & Brits 2018) is looking at plants and art (Gibson 2018, Aloï 2018). Despite the flourishing research into plant sentience 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 and contribute to the development of something like a planthroposcene?

Performing with plants, well? One of Yoko Ono's Instruction paintings from 1961 might be a better example of doing that:

Painting for the Wind

Cut a hole in a bag filled with seeds

Of any kind and place the bag where

There is wind

The planthroposcene is a notion coined, half seriously, by anthropologist Natasha Myers, in her article "From the Anthropocene to the Planthroposcene: Designing Gardens for Plant/People Involution" to reflect our dependence on plants. It is not a name for a time period, but is rather "a call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings," (Myers 2017, 4) "Plants surely have such a firm hold on our lives (think food, fuel, fodder, fibres, pharmaceuticals, and more)" [--] "And yet", she notes, "in the plant/people power nexus, humans remain the ones who draw up the designs..." (Myers 2017, 1) With the term involution she describes the way plants and people are bound together in projects of co-

becoming. “Turning tropically to one another, plants and people are both in-the-making in sites like gardens.”, she writes. (Myers 2017, 1) And not only in gardens, I would like to add.

In the following I will also try make use of Rosi Braidotti’s “Four theses on Posthuman Feminism” as analytical tools...

The work I will show in the in the background is one of several works made with the same rough time-lapse technique of repeated visits, trying to engage with a vegetal temporality, at least on some level. It is part of an artistic research project at Stockholm University of the Arts, funded by the Swedish Research Council, called *Performing with Plants*.

I

Alongside the critique of the notion of the Anthropocene and its way of conflating all humans as equally responsible, various alternative names have been suggested for our current situation. Jussi Parikka’s exploration of media theoretical deep time in his *Anthrobscen* (2014) is relevant for a discussion of contemporary performances, which often end up as digital media files, like these. For Parikka geology is relevant on the one hand as “the affordances that enable digital media to exist”, that is, “a metallic materiality that links the earth to the media-technological”. On the other hand, it is important as deep time, “the nonhuman earth times of decay and renewal” as well as to “the obscenities of the ecocrisis” taking place in “the *anthrobscene*.” (Parikka 2014, 62-63) For Parikka the Anthropocene is a radically environmental concept referring to “an environmentality understood and defined by the ‘technological condition’”. (Parikka 2014, 73). It expands from “natural ecology to an entanglement with technological questions, notions of subjectivity and agency” and criticizes a human-centered worldview, involving “accounts of rationality that are unable to talk about nonhumans as constitutive of social relations,” (ibid) a critique relevant when performing with plants.

In her text “Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism” in the anthology *Anthropocene Feminism* (Grusin 2017) Rosi Braidotti “provides a cartography of the intersections between feminism and the posthuman predicament” by suggesting that feminism is not a humanism; that *Anthropos* has been de-centered, that nonhuman life, *zoe*, rather than *bios*, should be our concern and “that sexuality is a force beyond, beneath, and after gender.” (Braidotti 2017, 21)

Her four theses for a posthumanist feminism: 1) feminism is not a humanism, 2) anthropos is off-center, 3) *zoe* is the ruling principle, 4) sexuality is a force beyond gender, can undoubtedly be put on stage and discussed on stage, but do they have relevance for developing or understanding performance practices off-stage and off-center? Such as practices trying to explore alternative ways and sites of performing, like performing with plants?

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. How to perform with plants and contribute to the development of something like a planthroposcene (Myers 2017), a livable future for humans and plants?

How can we act or perform with creatures, with whom we cannot communicate directly, or even ask for their consent for posing for a camera with them? In “performing with plants” I have tried to follow some basic rules of thumb, like

- 1) Try not to hurt the plant - choose plants that are bigger than you, stronger than you, plants that can share some of their energy with you - like trees
- 2) Visit the plant where it grows, respect its particular relationship to place.
- 3) Spend time with the plant, visit it repeatedly, although you cannot share the temporality of the plant, respect its relationship to time.

The implications of ‘performing with’, however, go further than that...

Concerning “Communication with Nature”, as in the title of this panel, in my performing with plants I am not really 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, of appearing together in the same urban space and image space. 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 or imaginatively take place.

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 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. 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* (Marder 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.

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.

The project can be related to 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, 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) or gardening. And why not forestry, too.

II

The examples of performing with plants that you see, or rather appearing with plants, take place on the sites where they grow - and in a mundane, somewhat unspectacular manner.

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 shown here, namely, sitting on the two spruce stumps. 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, 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).

III.

If we return to Braidotti’s four theses, we could perhaps try to use them as an analytical tool. What can be understood of a performance practice with the help of these four theses, if we take them as aspects to explore in a specific work? If we transform them into analytical

questions? Considering the performances with spruce stumps, what can we learn about them with the help of these theses?

Feminism is not a humanism. This statement could be transformed into the question: Are there humans involved in the performance and are they conceived in universalist terms? What is their role or character and action?

There is a human figure in a very dominating role in the images, sitting on a spruce stump, either relatively close to the camera (in the first image) or as a smaller figure among the trees (in the second image). It is perhaps not obvious that it is a woman, because she sits immobile with her back to the camera, but the pale pink scarf and the hairstyle would probably serve as indicia enough for many spectators. Although the human figure is seated with her back to us in the manner of the *rückenfiguren* in German romantic painting (Andrews 1999, 143), leading the viewer's gaze into the landscape, this could also be understood as a gesture to downplay the individual characteristics and the importance of the human figure, as a tool for off-setting the human. By abstracting the human figure into "a human figure", a universalising tendency is at play, a disregard of the specifics of race, gender, age, location and more.

Anthropos is off-center. This statement could be reformulated as: Are the humans in the centre or in focus in the performance? What is their relationship to other beings or elements that receive attention?

The human figure, the Anthropos in these images, is not off-center, but actually very much in focus, despite her immobility, or perhaps actually because of it. In the first image the seated figure covers a large area of the image space, and even though the huge felled spruce she is sitting on probably catches much of the attention, the human figure is certainly not off-center. The fact that the spruce, with its diagonal trunk, is given some prominence could be understood as an attempt at changing that. The huge trunk could also serve as a reminder of the devastating effects of human activities in the forest, although in this case it is probably left lying in the wood to promote biodiversity by providing nourishment for various insects, fungi and other critters. The gesture of sitting on the stump is actually rather morbid if we think of the tree as living being or "person" (Hall 2011); why sit on a corpse? In the second image the human is literally off-center to the left and much smaller, but nevertheless provides the focal

point or “argument” of the image. (Andrews 1999, 5.) She plays the leading role as some kind of fairy-tale character, with the spruces serving as the backdrop, the dark forest she is lost in, or whatever other narrative we want to develop around the composition.

Zoe is the ruling principle. This claim could be developed into asking: Are other life-forms present or presented in the performance and in what manner? How is vitality expressed?

Although the human presence is rather dominating in these images (more than was intended, actually) the images in some sense depict *zoe*, the vital processes underway. By repeating the same framing of the image from one video clip to the next and by thus highlighting the temporal changes in the environment across the seasons, the vital growth principle in the environment is made visible. During summer months the small rowan growing in the foreground in the first image momentarily takes centre stage, when its leaves fill the image space, partly covering the human figure. Moreover, the bark of the spruce trunk that slowly peels off and then has suddenly fallen to the ground provides an action beyond the human. By remaining immobile the human figure gives space for other actors or agents to move.

Sexuality is a force beyond gender. This thesis could be changed into the following question: How is sexuality or gender expressed in the performance?

It is perhaps difficult to see any expression of overt sexuality or desire in these images, although we can assume that there is a vital life force involved in the growth and decay in the woods. The human wish or need to partake in *zoe*, in an exchange with other beings in the environment, for good or bad, depending on the particular agents involved (mosquitoes, bacteria etc.) could be understood as a sexual desire of sorts. Affective exchange is definitely at play when returning to the same place and the same plants repeatedly for a year. All kinds of romantic overtones and emotional attachments could be imagined between the human and the tree. And as an experience of a shared life force, sexuality is omnipresent, as a will to breathe and sense and grow.

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.

IV

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.

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As an epilogue of sorts, to take another approach to trees and geological time, which I was not aware of when writing the proposal for this event: a few weeks ago, 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. Compared with Old Tjikko, the spruces and spruce stumps that I spent one year with, in the centre of Stockholm, are youngsters indeed, although relatives.

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