

**BEYOND THE SATURATION POINT –
Repetition and Difference in Performing with Trees**
(Annette Arlander)

Reference: Annette Arlander, 'Beyond the Saturation Point', *VIS* #5 (2021)
<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/857358/857359/0/0> [accessed...]

The short version of the video *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple* that you just saw (if not, you can find it in the exposition above) is an example of a time-lapse video, made as a ending of sorts for the artistic research project "Performing with Plants - Att uppträda med växter". The project was funded by the committee for artistic research at the Swedish Research Council with Stockholm University of the Arts as the host institution. The summary of the plan articulated the aims thus:

The project "performing with plants" aims to investigate whether collaborations with trees and other plants could be a way of entering into dialogue with our surroundings in concordance with a post-humanist and (new)materialist view of the environment. /- /- By focusing on individual parts of the landscape, especially plants – which we chemically have a symbiotic relationship with, while they produce the oxygen we consume, and we produce the carbon dioxide they need – more sensitive and ecologically sustainable modes of performing landscape can hopefully be developed [sic]. And these methods, artworks and events can possibly serve as inspiration and provocation and lead to a somewhat different understanding and experience of our surrounding world.

The video is also an example of continuing beyond the saturation point, if we consider the saturation point to be the point at which there is so much of a thing that nothing more can be added successfully, as the Merriam-Webster dictionary explains: when I began working on the video in January 2019, it was already obvious that it would not be finished in time for or fit in the book *Att uppträda med träd – Performing with Trees* (2019), which is the main artistic outcome of the project and documents the time-lapse videos made in Stockholm in 2017 and 2018. Then why did I decide to make it? One reason was the Tatarian maple (*Acer Tataricum*) in Nobelparken itself, its individuality or personality; it was unique in its own way due to the environment in which it had grown and the history through which it had lived, which had bent it as it did and continued to change it. And by visiting the maple regularly for a year, I learnt that our reactions to circumstances, our habits, our fixations and repetitions make us and our world what we are and what we become.

Working with time-lapse videos is perhaps, quite simply, doing something over and over again; repetition is the core of the practice. Usually, the repetition is created with the help of automated technology – a camera is set up somewhere and programmed to take an image every hour, or once every two hours. Making a manual time-lapse video is another matter. It is a practice, almost a ritual, and more than that, like all manual work, it produces minuscule (and sometimes not so minuscule) variations. When you do something again there will always be a slight shift, however much you try to do it exactly the same. In my practice of performing with trees there is one more crucial element: "everybody else". While I can try to keep my part as consistent as possible, making the framing of the image, the camera position, and my position as similar as possible during each repetition, the tree and everything around it will necessarily move and shift and change and do all kinds of things, sometimes almost

imperceptibly, sometimes spectacularly. In that sense, repetition is a tool to give change a chance!

The idea of repetition is relevant in my work on several levels – if we think of the example above, *Year of the Pig with the Tatarian Maple*, repetition (and the difference generated by it) is active on at least these basic levels:

Visiting the tree again and again, generally about three times a week for a year.

Repeating the same camera position and the same framing of the image.

Repeating the same body posture.

Repeating (approximately) the same duration of time.

Repeating a still-act or repetitive action (e.g. swinging).

Repeating the documentation with still images (with and without the human figure) on the RC.

Repeating the blog post (once a week).

Repeating the act of visiting a tree for a year, with a new tree (after visiting trees the previous year, and the year before that).

Repeating the idea of following the Chinese Calendar and naming the work accordingly (beginning with *Animal Years* 2002-2015).

Repeating the principles of editing from previous years with one version of full duration (using all the material), one version with 1-minute clip duration (for installation purposes), and one version with 10-second clip duration (for screening).

Repeating variations of the work of equal length and clip duration to be shown synchronized as two- or multichannel installations, for example the same images with and without the human performer side by side, thus creating a spatial rather than temporal repetition. (This option has been recorded, but as of yet not edited for the Tatarian Maple).

Why repeat?

Why do this again? And again? Elsewhere (Arlander 2016) I have discussed different relationships to repetition in theatre, live art and performance art, as well as the idea of repeating in the sense of revisiting or recreating an older work, as is done in reconstructions and reinterpretations or other re-imaginings (see Jones & Heathfield 2012). I explored that strategy in the research project “How to Do Things with Performance?” Here, I am concerned with repetition as a tool on a more fundamental level.

In the modern conception of art, repetition is usually linked to craft and industry, but in the twentieth century repetition “starts to be thought of not as the discredited other half of the couple originality/repetition, but as an important element at work.” (Kartsaki 2016, 3) In the spirit of my generation – although without really being aware of it – I have probably been working in response to Rosalind Krauss’ question: “What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproduction without originals?” (Krauss 1996, 168 quoted in Kartsaki 2016, 3). But rather than wishing to deconstruct modernism’s fixation with origins and originality by repetition or copies without originals (Krauss 1996, 170), I am

more interested in repetition as a tool for transformation. Time-lapse can actually be compared with the paradoxical formula of modernism – the grid – which compels repetition and involves the risk that artists begin to imitate themselves. (Krauss 1996, 160) Time-lapse, however, is not only a static grid; it can also be used to demonstrate constant change, a continuous becoming...

In the creation of time-lapse videos, the purpose of the repetition is obvious: it is needed in order to show the changes that take place over time. The setting up of a situation (a framing, a pose, etc.), an image to repeat, resembles an experimental research setup. Then, by repeating the situation, “the world” or rather the camera reacting to the changes in the light and weather conditions, will produce the changes, the art. When repeating the image for a year, the expected seasonal changes often dominate, even though there are always some unexpected things that emerge as well. Another aim is the production of difference, the creation of variations, which can be deliberate, not only resulting from changing circumstances, because repeating something in exactly the same way is not really possible if one works manually and with approximations like I do.

In the context of artistic research, one might ask: why go on repeating something if you’ve already found what you were looking for, or what you wanted to find out? South-African theatre director Mark Fleishman proposed in his text “The Difference of Performance as Research” that “performance as research is a series of embodied repetitions in time, on both micro (bodies, movements, sounds, improvisations, moments) and macro (events, productions, projects, installations) levels, in search of a series of differences” (Fleishman 2012, 28). He asks: “Where do the differences lie, in the repetitions or in the spaces in between? And is there a point at which the unleashing of differences is exhausted...?” (Ibid). He goes on to examine this problem in Deleuzian terms, but the question itself is provoking.

Later he suggests that repetition helps us perceive what is happening: “Repetition is an attempt to trip us up, to stop somehow the onward flow or at least to interrupt it, to slow it down so as to allow us to grasp it even if only fleetingly.” (Fleishman 2012, 35) He concludes by noting that unlike scientific enquiry, which tries to think the moving by means of that which does not move, and “is always focused on ‘immobilities’, on stable points or ‘points of rest’ in the movement flow”, artist researchers “need to find ways to ‘feel and live the intervals’”. This is the radical project of performance as research, and its difference”, (Ibid) he maintains.

In terms of live performance I agree, but as an artist performing mostly for the camera, I am quite happy with some immobile moments, too. There are a variety of approaches to performance as research; for a recent overview of artistic research in performance, see Cull Ó Maoilearca (2019).

For me, the question is rather: when do I reach the saturation point? Or further, why do I continue beyond the saturation point? Is it the force of habit, or is it an addiction, or pure obsession? In the social sciences, so-called qualitative researchers speak of a data saturation point, when the same ideas start to come up again and again in interviews and no new information is obtained. Then they know they can stop gathering material and begin analyzing it. As an artist, however, I do not gather material in order to analyze it, but to make work, and sometimes also in order to “go on singing”.

Repetition can be a problem, too – the inertia and obsessiveness in repetition, an unwillingness to let go, a fear of change, or perhaps sheer obsession, a link to the death drive, according to Freud. Repetition would then be inherently conservative, sticking to the tried and the true. Therefore, repetition can be a dangerous tool in art, if one gets stuck repeating old ideas. In most cases the repetition will somehow twist things a little, and something slightly different will appear, which will develop into something new – a variation which will lead somewhere else. A small change can break the pattern and shift the repetition just enough to dislocate it or open up new possibilities...

Flashback

For my M Phil work (1993-1994), which I had to do before my doctorate, because my generation had only received a diploma in directing and not an MFA, I directed ten variations of the same play with the same actors, dramatized for ten different sites. Already at that time, I thought repetition and variation were the key to research in art, although the variations in this case were deliberately produced adaptations.

Although variation is first and foremost an aesthetic form principle, to my mind it is inevitably linked to research. If there are no alternatives, if you cannot think and do things either this way or that way, there is nothing to ask, nothing to investigate. Or, of course there is, but only on a practical level, as differences in degree: how can you do this better, more efficiently, more economically, more personally, in a more moving way, and so on. Alternatives or variations, however, create aesthetic and content questions, on the level of signification, they open up perspectives sideways. Somewhat like simultaneous situations in performance aesthetics, they remind us that neighbors, too, do exist. One point is there, it is and that's it. Between two or more points tensions emerge, movement, even in thoughts. That is, at least for me.
(Arlander 1999, 56, my translation from Finnish)

Do I still think that?

Not really. At that time, I was still thinking in dramatic terms like suspense or milieu. Today, I am more interested in successive displacements, existence as a continuous becoming. Rather than adapting the material according to the context and creating variations and alternatives by myself, I now prefer maintaining a simple repetition as unchanged as possible and letting the “world” provide the variations, the transformation. By moving out from the stage, space variations are more or less given, and repetition becomes a tool for creating continuity. “Repetition is a central attribute of languages, whether verbal, visual or cultural. It is a fundamental structure by which meaning is made.” (Foster 2016, 213) In some sense, “to repeat is to simultaneously fix and transform”; we could even say that “repetition is the means by which the bounded entity can be perceived at all” (Ibid). One can notice things by repeating. And in a strange way, create things as well. “If we substitute the words ‘history’ or ‘tradition’ for ‘repetition’, wider stakes emerge.” (Foster 2016, 214) The interesting thing is what happens at “a critical cusp when the new is repeated once, then twice, and a ‘tradition’ becomes recognizable. With this cusp, repetition has the power to prescribe future events...” (Ibid).

And it is that power, in miniature, that I utilize in my time-lapse videos. I am not interested in returning to an original, as so many of those who write about repetition are (see Kartsaki

2016), but rather in prescribing a future, albeit only for my own practice. – But perhaps it's actually more about producing material, like picking berries for a pie.

Difference with Repetition

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes two different types of repetition in his seminal work *Difference and Repetition*, which I hope to be able to really comprehend some day: “the first type is a mechanical, ‘naked’ or ‘bare’ repetition, or repetition of the same, which simply reproduces the original”, while “[t]he second type includes difference; it is a dynamic repetition, evolving through time.” (Deleuze 2004, 27 quoted in Kartsaki 2016, 4) In the conclusion, he brings art into the discussion and proposes that “the highest object of art is to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decentrings; to embed them in one another and to envelop one or the other in illusions the ‘effect’ of which varies in each case.” (Deleuze 1994, 293) Moreover, he suggests that “[a]rt does not imitate, above all because it repeats; it repeats all the repetitions, by virtue of an internal power (an imitation is a copy, but art is simulation, it reverses copies into simulacra).” And not only that, “the most mechanical, the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art, it is always displaced in relation to other repetitions, and it is subject to the condition that a difference may be extracted from it for these other repetitions.” (Ibid) According to Deleuze, art can “lead us from the sad repetitions of habit to the profound repetitions of memory, and then to the ultimate repetitions of death in which our freedom is played out.” (Ibid)

Deleuze's ideas on difference and repetition serve as the starting point for Barbara Bolt, who writes of art as research in terms of “repetition with a difference”, as opposed to science as research, which works in terms of repetition of the same. She argues “that while in the scientific paradigm assessment of the validity of research lies in replication of the same” (other researchers should presumably be able to get the same results if they repeat the same experiment), a “performative paradigm would operate according to repetition with difference.” (Bolt 2016, 139) She presents an older schema, which she now discusses in a more nuanced manner, juxtaposing “science-as-research” and “art-as-research”. Science as research can be compared with constatives; it “describes/models the world”. Its methodology is built on “repetition of the same” and its interpretations are based on an understanding of “truth as correspondence”. Art as research, on the contrary, resembles the performative; it “does things in the world” and uses “repetition with difference” as its methodology. Its interpretations are not necessarily true or false, but rather felicitous or infelicitous performatives, built on the idea of “‘truth’ as force and effect”. (Bolt 2016, 140) Bolt emphasizes how it can often be difficult for an artist researcher to recognise and map what transformations have occurred in order to interpret the force and effect of the artistic research. It can be problematic because artistic research is often “emergent and experiential” and uses “tacit and intuitive processes” while “the transformations may seem to be so inchoate that it is impossible to recognise them, let alone map their effects.” (Bolt 2016, 141)

Let us return to my example. Did I discover something “new” by making *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple* in Nobelparken in 2019, something more than what I had already discovered when making the variations of *Year of the Dog in Lill-Jansskogen* in 2018 with the two pine trees and the two spruce stumps there? Was there some real difference produced? Well, the obvious difference was performing with a deciduous tree like a maple,

which undergoes dramatic changes over the year, unlike coniferous trees like spruces and pines, which largely remain the same. When beginning my sessions with the maple (not knowing that it was a maple tree at that time), I expected some leaves, of course, but did not imagine the lush greenery reminiscent of a rococo painting by Fragonard or something romantic by Claude Lorrain, which turned the image into the depiction of an almost indecent luxury. I had performed with deciduous trees before, for example with a sycamore in Humlegården and a beech in Djurgården in 2017, but the images were framed differently, and the leaves were barely visible. (Arlander 2020) The exuberant foliage of the Tatarian maple emphasizes the seasons and made me realize that a year is perhaps not the best schedule for performing with trees, precisely because the seasons would inevitably dominate. To focus on the tree rather than the seasons, other schedules could work better – perhaps a day, a month.

Probably the most important realization – and the Tatarian maple was not the only tree partner that served as its inspiration – was the insight of the individuality of trees (or rather personality, because trees are not in-dividual but actually quite divisible). Even in a small wood like Lill-Jansskogen, the forest as an ecosystem – as an environment of many trees resembling each other – takes precedence. The Tatarian maple was one of a kind. Well, not really. There are plenty of Tatarian maples in Stockholm, even in Nobelparken actually, but this tree was unlike any other, very special actually, and not only because I had befriended it during the year, but because of the history it had lived through, which had forced it to bend as it had done. And to shift the focus to humans, because the same goes for them as for the trees, I guess – it is our reactions to circumstances, our relationships, habits, fixations and repetitions that make us and our world the way we are...

On a practical level, this realization (combined with the acquaintance with some other outstanding trees in that same year) led me to initiate a new project, called “Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees”, where the focus is, as the title suggests, on encounters with individual trees. The project is described and documented on a blog, here: (<https://meetingswithtrees.com>). But that is already another story.

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