

## Performing Landscape – Swinging Together<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract (150-170 words)

Swinging together is an artistic experiment that involves performing with the projection of an image on the site of its making, including the image of others swinging at the same site. It relates to the themes of spatiality, sociality and sensorium, the three ecologies by Guattari (2000) and my previous work with performing landscape (Arlander 2012). The text discusses experiences of some initial experiments in Helsinki in 2014-2015 in relation to Karen Barad's thinking (2007), to ideas concerning haptic visuality by Laura U. Marks (2007), and notions related to eco-cinema (Rust, Monani & Cubitt 2013). Some video clips of the pre-performances with participants and the performances with the projections are included. Based on these initial experiments, projecting an image back to the site of its making, and performing with participants as projection are worth exploring further.

### Key Words:

performance; landscape; site; swinging; moving image; projection; haptic visuality; eco-cinema; participation

Swinging together is an artistic experiment that involves performing with the projection of an image on the site of its making and with the image of others previously swinging at the same site. It relates to the themes of spatiality, sociality and sensorium, the three ecologies by Guattari – roughly the subjectivity, the socius and the (global) environment - (2000) and to my previous work with performing landscape (Arlander 2012). Based on my attempts at swinging together in Helsinki in 2014 and 2015, I will discuss these experiences in relation to Karen Barad's thinking (2007), to ideas concerning haptic visuality in moving images in Laura U. Marks' *The Skin of Film* (2007), and notions related to eco-cinema in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013) by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt. Although not explicitly discussed here, these experiments have been inspired by thinkers developing a vital posthuman materialism, like Rosi Braidotti (2013) and Jane Bennett (2010). These thoughts, very much a work in progress, are mainly in a descriptive mode. Some video clips, including fragments of the pre-performances with voluntary participants and excerpts of the documentation from the performances with the projections, will be included in the following.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on "Performing Landscape - Swinging Together", presentation at *Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology, Relationality. VI Conference of New Materialisms* in Melbourne 27-29.9.2015.

## A Bit of Barad to Begin with

For those with experience of performance as research (Allegue & al. 2009; Riley & Hunter 2009; Barrett & Bolt 2010, 2014; Barton, Dreyer-Lude & Birch 2013; Nelson 2013) it is easy to agree with physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad when she states: ‘We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming’ (Barad, 2007, 185). Importantly, for Barad discourse is not a synonym for language and meaning or intelligibility are not human-based notions. ‘Discursive practices are the material conditions for making meaning [...] [and] meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility’ (Barad 2007, 335). She consequently refuses to separate discourse and materiality and prefers to speak of material-discursive practices.

According to Barad ‘experimenting and theorizing are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning... [they] are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of the phenomena produced’ (Barad, 2007, p 56.). The same could be said of many art practices, as is evident in practices like performing landscape, where there is no possibility of ‘stepping outside’ the environment. This is methodologically important for much artistic research, where the researcher is literally producing phenomena and not only observing them, as I do in these cases. However, if we follow Barad, the entanglement of the subject and object of study in artistic research is merely one obvious example of something that concerns all forms of research or all kinds of engagements with the environment.

## Swinging goes on while the swinger changes

Usually the main focus in my performances for camera and the resulting video works has been the relationship with the environment. In these examples, working with several participating performers brings them closer to the theme of collaboration. Even while performing solo, however, I am never alone, but work together with numerous more or less living co-authors and contributors, like the swing and the tree.

Documenting various people swinging in the same swing and editing their action into a continuous movement formed one part of the project *Year of the Snake - Swinging* (2014). It served as an example in a text where I tried to understand the term intra-action coined by Barad in contrast to the usual term inter-action, which presumes that the interacting objects pre-exist the action.<sup>2</sup> In one of the video works created as part of that project on Harakka Island, *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (26 min. 30 sec.) people visiting the island were invited to sit for a while in a small blue swing attached to an aspen on the western shore approximately once a week during the year of the snake between 10 February 2013 and 28 January 2014. <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake->

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<sup>2</sup> The paper “From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape”, was presented at V Annual Conference on New Materialisms, New Materialist Methodologies – Gender, Politics, The Digital in Barcelona 25-26.9. 2014. And later published as Arlander, Annette “From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape”. In: Beatriz Revellez Benavente, Ana M. Gonzalez Ramos, Krizia Nardini (coord.). “New feminist materialism: engendering an ethic-onto-epistemological methodology”. *Artnodes*. No. 14, p. 26-34.

[swinging-along/](#) Some days there was no visitor, and thus some sessions with an empty swing were inserted in the first version of the video. In another, shorter version based on the same material, *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along (mix)* (3 min. 40 sec.) I used images of myself swinging to fill in the gaps. <http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-the-snake-swinging-along-mix/> By editing the movement of the swing to seem continuous, one person is smoothly transformed into another in a continuous succession of swingers. In this case the actual people swinging never met each other, though.

While *Year of the Snake - Swinging* was still in the making I presented the project in a workshop at the Porous Studio organized by the Artists' Committee of PSi (Performance Studies International) at the conference PSi #19 at Stanford University in California in 2013.<sup>3</sup> The video clip “Swinging with the Snake in Stanford” (52 sec.) is a brief documentation of that experiment. <https://vimeo.com/69953101> This first attempt at swinging together took place as an attempt at sharing the experience. Focus was on experiencing the magnificent tree; the documentation was secondary: thus the camera angle is strange and the image is haphazardly framed.

Another instance of swinging together took place as part of a workshop<sup>4</sup> at the meeting of the Performance as Research Working Group of the IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) in Warwick, UK in 2014. A short video “Swinging at Warwick” (1 min 29 sec.) was made of the documentation. <https://vimeo.com/104233709> During the session some questions inspired by Michael Marder's book *Plant-Thinking, A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) were presented to the swingers, to think about while swinging and to answer afterwards, and these were edited into another video clip.

### Projecting and image on the site of its making

These workshops were not conceived as artworks, but as experiential demonstrations. Only after finishing my twelve-year project on Harakka Island<sup>5</sup>, which ended with a year of swinging, did I start thinking of how to develop swinging together into a live performance. I had combined live action with the projected image of a similar action before, starting with *Tuulikaide – Wind Rail* in 2002,<sup>6</sup> but never projected a video onto the site where it was recorded. A description of Lorie Novak projecting an image of her mother on vegetation at night (described by Hirsch in Smith & Watson 2002, 248) was one of the inspirations for these outdoor projections. The work of Swedish artist Monica Sand was another influence for swinging.

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<sup>3</sup> On June 27th 2013. The participants testing the swing were Ray Langenbach, Johanna Householder, Angel Viator Smith, Jenni Kokkomäki, Pamela Davis Kivelson and Annette Arlander.

<sup>4</sup> The workshop on 29 July 2014 was prepared for the working group by Juan Manuel Aldape Munoz, Stephanie Bauerochse and Annette Arlander.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief description of the project see Arlander, Annette "Performing Landscape for Years". *Performance Research* Special issue: On Time. 19-3 2014, 27-31.

<sup>6</sup> See “Tuulikaide – Eräänlainen alku” / “Wind Rail – Sort of a Beginning” *Ruukku – Studies in Artistic Research* 1/ 2013. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=42484>

During the summer 2014 I made two experiments with performances in two parts: The first part was a pre-performance with the participants swinging, documented on video. The second part was a solo performance with me swinging in relationship to the projected image of the documentation of the participatory event. *Swinging Tonight* in Suomenlinna, and *Swinging in Moonlight* on Harakka Island were performances with projections created in those same places. In the autumn 2015 I made a third attempt, *Swinging Together*, as part of an environmental art exhibition in Lauttasaari.

The first participatory pre-performance took place at the “t0NiGHt” event in Suomenlinna the night between 23 and 24 May. I fastened the small blue swing on a tree next to gallery Augusta, invited the public to swing, just before sunrise, and documented their swinging on video. The ‘raw material’, the documentation of the swingers, was edited into a video later to be projected on site. <https://vimeo.com/157896162> For the actual performance at the next “t0NiGHt” event on the night between 25 and 26 July two months later, the video was projected on the roof next to the tree, while I tried to swing synchronized with the swinging in the projected image, a ghostly shadow, for approximately 90 minutes. For some reason only the first minute of the performance was recorded on tape, with very little movement visible in the darkness.

<https://vimeo.com/103069308>



“Swinging Tonight” 23-24.5.2014. Video still AA.



“Swinging Tonight” 25.8.2014. Photo: Antti Ahonen.

The second participatory pre-performance took place at the opening of the exhibition *Water Images* on Harakka Island 29 May 2014. The swing was fastened to an old birch in the yard and visitors to the exhibition were invited to swing. An edited version of the documentation was later projected onto the same birch, <https://vimeo.com/157423805> as part of the performance, which took place at the Moonlight Party on 9 August 2014 on the same site. The projection was visible against the white trunk of the birch at night and created a temporal and visual mixture, resembling a double exposure, if you wish. Parts of the durational performance were recorded on video with the camera on a tripod and edited into a small video. <https://vimeo.com/103242549>



“Swinging on Harakka” 29.5.2014. Video still AA.



“Swinging in Moonlight” 9.8.2014. Video still AA.

Of these two experiments the second one was more successful, partly due to a more suitable site, the informal character of the events on Harakka Island, and as a result of my learning from experience. Only the second time, for instance, did I ask the participants to write down their names in order to include them in the credits. In the first solo performance I made many unnecessary movements, tried to copy the actions of the swingers, changed direction in the swing and so on. Only during the second performance did I relax and take advantage of the durational character to let go of the internalized demand to maintain the attention of the audience and focused on creating an image of motion.

Contrary to the title of this paper, *Swinging Together*, people in the pre-performances were not really swinging together, but doing it each at their turn. They were able to witness each other swinging, however, to encourage each other, and to enjoy the experience of swinging. Being documented spurred most of them into action. As an artwork the act of swinging, one after the other, was confusing for some spectators, though, since it did not have any conceptual or critical dimension; what was the point? Some accepted that the point was experiencing the tree and the swing. In the second part, the performance with the projection, people who had witnessed the first part enjoyed seeing themselves, although the projected image was so blurred that it was hard to distinguish who was swinging; the movement was discernible, as a ghostly shadow with its own will. The image produced some form of equity in movement, however, by turning everybody into contributors in the same continuous swinging. Especially in the later version, *Swinging in Moonlight*, the projected image functions as a light source and produces a ‘magic’ ambience entwined with the foliage.

A third experiment took place in 2015, in the context of an environmental art exhibition *LARU Human era 2015* in the southern part of Särkiniemi peninsula in Lauttasaari, in Helsinki.<sup>7</sup> In order to come close to the only possible source of electricity I

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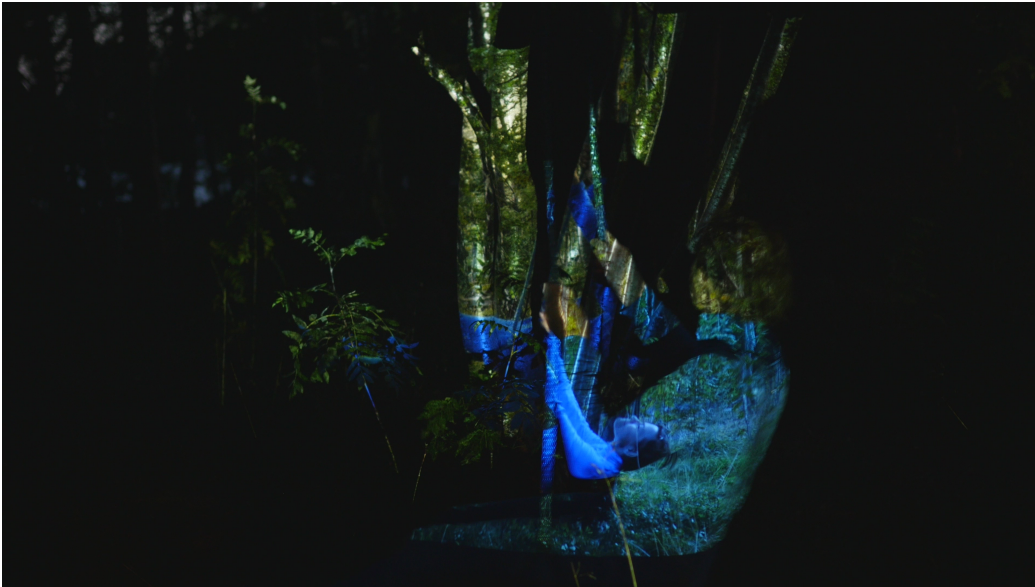
<sup>7</sup> For an idea of the context, see <http://www.laruart.com>

had to choose a young rowan, which was far from ideal for the swing. This time I wanted to invite the artists participating in the exhibition to swing and planned to perform with their projected images at the opening. Gathering the artists together turned out to be too complicated. Thus, on the day before the opening, on Friday afternoon August 28, I spent a few hours inviting passers-by in the park to try out the swing and recorded them swinging. Surprisingly many were willing to do that and even seemed to enjoy it. The following morning, I edited the video for the performance at the opening the same night. <https://vimeo.com/157428004>

While we were waiting for the sun to set, in order to have sufficient darkness for the projection to work, I realized that the slowly appearing projection on the thin trunks of the rowan at dusk was visually more interesting than a fully visible projection. To spend the time, I invited the audience to try the swing and to lean back and look up at the sky through the foliage. This experience of swinging would probably have been enough of an event for the opening, similar to the pre-performances of the previous experiments. To finish the experiment, finally, at nightfall I performed my attempt at synchronised swinging, only once (for 20 minutes) and not as a durational performance, for the small audience who had patiently waited for the darkness with me. The performance was recorded on video with the camera on tripod next to the projector, a little too close to the tree and the swing, with the human figure thus filling the image space. My body turned into a projection screen, unlike the previous version, where the projection formed an independent shadow on the tree trunk. I performed once more at the closing event on 4<sup>th</sup> October, and tried a slightly different angle. The first performance, however, is the one documented on video. <https://vimeo.com/137770819> Although slightly different from what I intended, the performance documentation turned out to be visually interesting. Although the human figure is too large in proportion to the tree, it turns into a screen and merges with the environment and the swingers.



"Swinging Together (Laru)" 28.8.2015. Photo AA.



"Swinging Together" 29.8.2015. Video still AA.

In this third iteration of the performance three dimensions of the event appeared in succession: a) a participatory dimension, the experiential performance of swinging for the participants, b) a visual dimension, the subtle projection slowly appearing on the tree alongside the sunset, and c) the explicit performance with the projection, which included a dual exposure of the image, on the tree and on my body, and a dual movement of the swing, recorded and live, more or less synchronised or dis-synchronised. As a result of the proximity of the projector and the camera, the landscape seems to recede into its accustomed position as a background, while the performer fills the image space. By transforming into a screen and merging with the environment the human figure nevertheless becomes immaterial and appears to dissolve into the background.

### Haptic visuality

The idea of haptic visuality seems relevant to this last version of the swinging, perhaps due to the intimate space and the human body as a screen. The concept is discussed by Laura U. Marks in *The Skin of the Film - Intercultural Cinema, embodiment, and the senses* (2000). She focuses on independent films that describe diasporic experiences and places the phenomenon of intercultural cinema in a historical postcolonial context, and describes the infrastructure for funding and producing such films as well as the specific audiences addressed and involved, touched by the actual 'skin of the film'. Her idea that many of these intercultural filmmakers try to evade objectifying visuality and work with the blurring of vision in order to evoke other senses is connected to this work in some way. Projecting the image on a surface with a texture of its own, and the ghostly appearance of shadows of people not fully visible but discernible through their movement might resonate with her ideas. As does in some sense the idea of repetition, of returning to the same place, showing the same thing over and over again, trying to grasp what exactly is happening there, waiting for the details to come to life.

Marks derives the term haptic visuality from the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl and defines it in her own way. 'Optical visuality depends on a separation between



the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.' (Marks 2000, 162) For her haptic works 'invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what he or she is beholding. Such images resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all.' (Marks 2000, 162-163) Marks further writes: 'While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality.' (Marks 2000, 163) The difference between haptic and optic visuality is a matter of degree, she notes; in most processes of seeing both are involved. In my examples the materiality of the image is accentuated by the three dimensional 'surface' the image is projected on, which partly distorts and dilutes the images.

According to Marks '[h]aptic images are actually a subset of what Deleuze referred to as optical images: those images that are so "thin" and unclichééd that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them. The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative.' (Marks 2000, 163) For her '[h]aptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure' but 'encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image /--/ [and] does not require an initial separation between perceiver and object that is mediated by representation.' (Marks 2000, 164) In these cases the environment, outdoors at night, reinforces a bodily relationship with the image, as does the movement, which, however, probably does invite identification as well.

Although the projected image in *Swinging Together* is blurred and diluted on the tree trunks, the grass and the darkness, with mainly the movement of the swing discernible, it seems, somewhat paradoxically, that it is especially my own experience, while performing, that is haptic. Looking closely at the diffuse projection on the tree trunk near me, while swinging, trying to distinguish and follow the movement in the vaguely discernible image, provided an intensely haptic and intimate experience. For the viewers, watching the whole setup, following the diverging patterns created by the projection and the movement of the swing, the experience might have been much less so. Moving with the image and the environment and the actual movement in the projected image nevertheless produce a particular kind of double exposure.

Although her focus on diasporic and intercultural experiences makes relating Marks' ideas to this work somewhat questionable, her emphasis on haptic visuality does resonate with my attempt at exploring movement, materiality and slowing down.

## Expanded Eco-cinema

Slow film is a phenomenon related to eco-cinema. The idea that one should use long shots and slow down the frequency of image changes in order to be able to see what is going on in the environment makes sense on some level. There is a risk of slowing down too much, however, so the viewer loses interest altogether. In an exhibition context one can play with a seemingly static image including changes over time, and with rhythmic

change, which is spellbinding as such. In a live performance – unless it is a durational one – the dynamic is different; a development is expected and does take place in the perception of the work, whether one wants it or not.

Within eco-cinema slowness and static images of long duration have been considered the hallmarks of an ecological approach to film. Scott MacDonald for instance defines certain films as eco-cinema primarily because they provide within the film experience an experience of nature that functions as a model for patience and mindfulness, characteristics of awareness that are decisive for a deep appreciation of and commitment to the natural environment. (MacDonald 2013, 19) According to him the main task of eco-cinema is not to produce traditional narrative films in Hollywood style to propagate for an ecological awareness, nor traditional documentary films, although they can be useful. The task is to provide new kinds of film experiences, which offer an alternative to conventional modes of watching media and thus help to foster a more sensitive relationship to the environment. (MacDonald 2013, 20) The efficacy of a specific 'artistic' approach has been questioned as well (Ingram 2013, 43) and one could ask whether a focus on 'nature' as something separate is at all meaningful (Haraway 2003). Some critics see the creation of eco-cinema as the creation of worlds in the same way as any films and point out that both ends of the production and consumption chain of cinema are rooted in a self-sufficient and active materiality that also resists them. It offers itself to us as territory, earth, nature and resource, and at the same time retreats from us as time, death and mystery. (Ivakhiv 2013, 100)

In terms of the characteristics of eco-cinema the experiments with swinging together differ considerably. The same elements, long shots with a static camera and repetition, were present in all the swinging performances. There is a constant repetition of movement, a swinging back and forth, but not much else in terms of action or narrative takes place. Only the swingers change, sometimes imperceptibly, and with them the rhythm, force, speed and span of the swinging. The first experiment was focused on the participating swingers and their performances. The second version gave the birch tree a much more prominent role. The third version again foregrounded the human figure, but by turning the body into a projection screen. In terms of the goals of eco-cinema, sensitizing the viewer to the interdependencies and slow changes in the environment, a stronger work might be created by simply projecting an image of a tree back onto that tree, without human swingers claiming attention. Although missing the movement would be a loss.

There is something 'retro' in the use of the human body as a projection surface; it was more of a side-effect in this case. Perhaps these experiments could be related to expanded cinema rather than eco-cinema, due to their unconventional use of projection screen and by the combination of moving image and live action. According to art historian Chrissie Iles, early film and video installations in the 1960s presented two different approaches to space. In the tradition of expanded cinema some installations created environments with large-scale film projections and slide shows, which could be understood as communal dream spaces or metaphors of expanded consciousness. At the same time, early video performances explored social space and the participation of the spectator in a strictly conceptual way. They utilised the possibilities of real-time mirroring and live feedback recording offered by new video technology. (Iles 2000, 252-53) In some sense

these experiments of swinging together combine aspects from both traditions, the communal dream space as well as the real time of performance.

### Concluding to Continue

Returning to Barad (2007; 2012), in terms of the intra-action of the main collaborators, tree–swing–body–movement–light, the balance varies in all three versions. Considering the materiality, or the material-discursive practices involved, one could observe several aspects: those related to vegetation, to human contributors (including participation, willingness to perform and be recorded), to movement, to technology (including the machines for recording, editing and projecting) to light (including sunlight or darkness and light produced by electricity) and to performance (including the conventions of gathering together to watch people engaged in some supposedly meaningful activity and of doing something rather than representing an action). And of course one cannot bypass the material-discursive practices related to visuality and screen-based art of which the above mentioned notions haptic visuality, eco-cinema and expanded cinema are just a few.

Methodologically the experiences of these variations of swinging together point to the importance of the context and the set up, the small changes in circumstances, for what might emerge as unforeseen possibilities and meanings due to a slight shift in emphasis. In these cases, no pre-planned variations of the ‘experimental arrangement’ were included; the shifts occurred simply by adapting to changing circumstances. Following Barad one could say that subjects and objects, matter and meaning were intra-actively produced in differing ways, due to the shifting entanglements and agential cuts involved in each version.

When watching the documentation of the performances the various processual layers of the image lose their individual importance and the image seems to consist of various layers of light. In the moment of performing and witnessing the performance the physical surroundings, the feel of the vegetation and the ground, the darkness, humidity and chill of the night as well as the presence of other witnesses and spectators all contribute to the artificial ‘magic’ of the projected image. Based on these initial experiments, both the idea of projecting an image back to the site of its making, and the idea of performing with participants as projection are worth exploring further in the future.

### Video links

*Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* 2014 (26 min. 30 sec.) HD 16:9

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

*Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (mix) 2014 (3 min. 40 sec.) HD 16:9

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

“Swinging at Warwick” 29<sup>th</sup> July 2014 (1 min 29 sec.) <https://vimeo.com/104233709>

“Swinging with the Snake in Stanford” 27<sup>th</sup> June 2013 (52 sec.)

<https://vimeo.com/69953101>

- “Swinging Tonight” 23 May 2014 (15 min 33 sec) <https://vimeo.com/157896162>
- “Swinging Tonight” 25<sup>th</sup> July 2014 (1 min 1 sec.) <http://vimeo.com/103069308>
- “Swinging on Harakka” 29 May 2014 (24 in 46 sec) <https://vimeo.com/157423805>
- “Swinging in Moonlight” 9<sup>th</sup> August 2014 (4 min 11 sec) <http://vimeo.com/103242549>
- “Swinging Together (Laru)” 28 August 2015 (21 min 33 sec) <https://vimeo.com/157428004>
- ”Swinging Together” 29 August 2015 (21 min 20 sec) <https://vimeo.com/137770819>

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Annette Arlander is an artist, researcher and a pedagogue. She is educated as theatre director, MA (philosophy) and DA (theatre and drama). She was professor of performance art and theory at Theatre Academy, Helsinki (2001-2013), head of the Performing Arts Research Centre (2007-2009), professor of artistic research and vice dean for research at University of the Arts Helsinki Theatre Academy 2015-2016, visiting professor at Stockholm University of the Arts 2015-2016. Arlander is member of the editorial board of JAR (Journal for Artistic Research) and co-convener of the Performance as Research working group of IFTR. Her research interests include artistic research, performance as research, performance studies, site-specificity and the environment. Her artwork is focused on performing landscape by means of video or recorded voice.

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