

Performing with Plants

Research proposal

The significance of the artistic research and its links to the wider artistic or scientific discussion

To perform and co-operate with plants and especially trees is an artistic research project, which develops and specifies the question How to perform landscape today?, a question I have worked with in various forms during several years. The question is not rhetorical; our relationship to the environment has dramatically changed due to global warming and other more or less manmade disasters and demands new approaches. A posthumanist perspective prompts us to rethink the notion landscape and to consider how the surrounding world consists of creatures, life forms and material phenomena with varying degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing, realizing or activating landscape could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements in a landscape, such as specific trees, and explore what can be done together with them, for instance how to perform for camera together.

To investigate ways of 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 new materialist post-humanist 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 life on the planet in its current oxygen based form.

Within fine art and stage arts landscape is linked to the tradition of expressing human emotions and moods by projecting them on the environment. Classic examples include romantic landscape painting (i.e. C.D. Friedrich) or poetic descriptions of landscape (i.e. in Shakespeare's King Lear). Since modernism this traditional understanding of landscape has been questioned and criticised (Andrews 1999) as colonialist, anachronistic and incompatible with contemporary (post) conceptual views of art. Today this modernist critique could be considered outdated, because we cannot draw an easy line between nature and culture, between human beings and their environment or other creatures sharing this planet.

Whether the notion landscape is any longer useful within contemporary art has been discussed within art theory (DeLue & Elkins 2008). The many meanings of landscape are debated within geography (Wylie 2007) and even supported within feminist theory (Casid 2011). Within theatre and performance studies landscape is mostly linked to drama (Fuchs & Chaudhuri 2002), to site-specificity (Kaye 2000; Hill & Paris 2006, Pearson 2010,) or to eco-performance (Giannachi et al. 2005; Kershaw 2007, Arons & May 2012). In film studies interesting discussions concern ecocinema (Rust & Monani 2013). Within artistic research Mats Leiderstam (2006) and Monica Sand (2008), to name a few, have scrutinized landscape.

Theoretically this project is connected to post-humanist and new materialist discussions concerning the vitality of matter and the possibilities and limits of animistic approaches. To expel certain parts of existence to serve as environment to humans is no longer automatically acceptable. Since we are surrounded by more or less living entities or things, who have a kind

of subjectivity (Abram 2010), or a form of agency, “thingpower” (Bennett 2010), we have to rethink notions like environment, surroundings and landscape. The project is beginning with and practically exploring whether notions by some new materialist feminist theoreticians like Donna Haraway's “natureculture” (2003), Karen Barad's “intra-action” and “material-discursive practices” (2007) and Rosi Braidotti's “zoe” (2013) could be helpful in articulating attempts at performing landscape with a difference. And whether they could be linked with notions like Michael Maerder's “vegetal democracy” and plant thinking (2013, 2015).

Artistically the project can be positioned at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and media art (or video art), with emphasis on the legacy of Fluxus (Friedman 1990; Dezeuse 2002; Robinson 2002; Higgins 2002), especially the use of so called event scores. The project combines values from performance art and its emphasis on embodied presence in the here and now together with spectators, with the way video- and media art stress repetition, transformation and a critical reflection on technology, and with the sensitivity to natural phenomena within environmental art, including an understanding of the possible effects and side effects an artwork can have.

There is a long tradition of combining landscape and the female body in performance art, from Ana Mendieta to contemporary examples like Marilyn Arsem or Essi Kausalainen, who has collaborated with plants. Within dance Paula Kramer, or Eeo Stubbeffeld together with the ageing Anna Halprin, have explored the relationship of body and landscape. The Finnish photographic artists Susanna Majuri and Elina Brotherus have placed themselves in the landscape. Tuula Närhinen, has worked with trees, letting them draw or paint with light by lamps on their branches, photographing the result. Terike Haapoja has transformed the breathing of plants into sound (Venice biennale 2014) and Eija-Liisa Ahtila has created a video portrait of a spruce (*Horizontal* 2011), to show how our representational system is built to depict humans. These are examples of a broad field, which this project wants to contribute to from an embodied and interdisciplinary standpoint. In practical terms, rather than making plants understandable for humans with the help of technology, for instance by sonification of biological processes, (like Marcus Maerder) or by working in the tradition of bio art, with living tissues or bacteria as materials, my aim is to explore everyday forms of embodied co-operation with plants.

The aims and methods of the artistic research

The project explores how performing with trees and other plants could become a mode of working attuned with a posthumanist and new materialist views on the environment. The project further develops and reworks a practice I have called “performing landscape” and experiments with new ways based on that, especially the techniques used in the twelve-year project *Animal Years* (2002-2014) and the on-going series *Trees Talk* (2003-). By focusing on individual elements of the landscape, particularly plants – which we chemically have a symbiotic relationship with, while they produce the oxygen we need and they use the carbon dioxide we produce – perhaps some more sensitive and more sustainable modes of performing landscape can be developed.

The project takes as its starting point the methodological discussions within artistic research (Borgdorff 2012; Schwab 2015; Biggs & Karlsson 2011) and creative arts research (Barrett & Bolt 2010, 2014) as well as performance as research (Allegue & al. 2009, Riley & Hunter 2009; Freeman 2010; Nelson 2013) using artistic practice as the main method for knowledge production and knowledge transfer. It has some affinities with auto-ethnographic work, since

the experiences of the artist-researcher are used, and with action research via a cyclic structure of planning, performance, reflection, revised planning and so on. This exploratory part (in 2017) is a first cycle, in preparation for a possibly larger project in the future.

By using basic video technology and repetition, by presenting the results within contemporary art and by considering the specific materiality individual trees offer, the project develops alternatives to existing ways of working. By focusing on landscape and trees as something to perform with, experience, appreciate and return to, by organising small-scale performance events where the spectators can participate and by generating conversations (through a blog, a media archive and discussions) the project responds to current concerns within artistic research. As a cross-boundary project at the intersection of the performative and the medial (digital) the project could also use these concepts as analytical tools; the performative in Butler's sense of productive repetition and in Austin's sense of efficacy; the mediated in terms of media (video or performance), the remediated (Bolter & Grusin 2000) and the challenge of social media to explore alternative forms of production and distribution.

The core questions explored are: 1) How can we co-operate with nonhuman entities like plants (trees and shrubs)? 2) How can we create actions with them that human participants can be invited to join in? As an overall research task the project asks: How perform landscape today, by co-operating with trees and other plants and with an awareness of current posthumanist and new materialist understanding of the environment?

These questions are investigated through documented artistic work, starting with previously used methods by systematically varying some of the parameters. They can be translated into working questions, like: 1) How can I articulate methods for cooperating with plants into poetic instructions or event scores? 2) How can I combine projected video with live performance in a lecture performance or by projecting a video back on the site of its making?

The main method thus consists in making documented artistic experiments, and in reflecting on them in relation to chosen theoretical notions. The three main forms to begin artistic exploration are: 1) performances for camera repeated with the same tree and edited into video works, 2) co-performances with visitors recorded on video, edited and projected back onto the site in a live performance and 3) interactive experiments with talking trees, or a lecture performance with voice over text, live action and a monologue combined with projections.

On the basis of these experiments poetic instructions or event scores will be written, to be realized or simply contemplated by the public, as an updated form of a Fluxus technique. Moreover, by keeping a research blog, and compiling an open media archive on the Research catalogue, the project will be open for the artistic research community and the interested public from the start.

The current state and schedule of the artistic research

The project will take place as a one-year preliminary exploration (2017), to be developed into a larger research project in the future.

Schematic time plan for first cycle

Spring and summer 2017

1. Organise an introductory seminar with invited guests (i.e. philosopher Michael Marder, performance artist Essi Kausalainen)
2. Experiment and perform for camera with selected trees

3. Write event scores based on the experiments
4. Publish a blog about the process, open 'field notes', through-out the project
5. Collect the video material on the Research Catalogue, an open archive, through-out the project.
6. Establish contact with other artists working with plants or trees, gather relevant literature.
7. Present the project for comments at seminars and working group meetings, the performance as research working group of IFTR, the artistic research working group of PSI, if possible at CARPA 5 and the upcoming New Materialisms conference, as well as other events.

Autumn 2017

1. Continue performing for camera with the selected trees
2. Continue the blog and the media archive
3. Prepare a co-performance with projections, with invited participants and/or a lecture performance.
4. Write an article reflecting on the project
5. Edit the video material
6. Edit the event scores
7. Organise a seminar with invited guests and present the results produced so far
8. Plan for future developments based on experiences during the year.

How the project contributes to new knowledge and knowledge-making

The project has relevance and produces knowledge for the field of artistic research through its experimental and interdisciplinary character, at the intersection of performative and mediated practices. The main importance lies in the fact that the overall research topic – how to cooperate with non-human entities like plants – communicates on interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary level, growing directly out of an artistic practice, without turning it instrumental.

The project is also producing knowledge concerning the usefulness of notions like “natureculture”, “intra-action” and “material-discursive practices” and “zoe” (2013) as well as “vegetal democracy” and plant thinking, when articulating attempts at performing with plants, as mentioned above.

The expected results of the artistic research, especially for international audiences

The results of the project are addressed to an art audience as well as a multidisciplinary academic public. The project will produce art works in the form of 1) performances for camera, 2) video works, 3) participatory performance events with projections or a lecture performance and 4) poetic event scores, that is, a series of examples of and an articulated method for how to co-operate and co-perform with plants, especially trees. Moreover, the project will be described and discussed in a 5) theoretically reflective article, in 6) a blog during the process, 7) an open archive on the Research Catalogue, 8) conference presentations for the performance as research working group of the IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research), artistic research working group at PSI (Performance Studies International), and perhaps conferences on New Materialisms, and CARPA (Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts).

The most important national and international partners

Possible partners include Performing Arts Research Centre at University of the Arts Helsinki Theatre Academy and the newly founded Centre for Artistic Research at the University of the

Arts Helsinki, the Finnish Bio Art Society, Ruukku – Studies in artistic Research, University of the Arts Stockholm, and the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme.

12. 146 characters here

Justification for why the artistic research project should be implemented at the Collegium

As an artist working as teaching professor for most of the time since 2001 and actively engaged in the development of artistic research in Finland I would appreciate a possibility to devote some time to artistic research on my own and to do it in an interdisciplinary context where I could receive impulses from fields outside art as well.

Literature referenced

- Abram, David. 2010. *Becoming Animal – An Earthly Cosmology*. New York: Random House
- Allegue, L., Kershaw, B., Jones, S. and Piccini, A. (eds.) 2009. *Practice-as-Research in Performances and Screen*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Andrews, Malcolm. 1999. *Landscape and Western Art*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Arlander, Annette. 2012. *Performing Landscape – Notes on Site-specific Work and Artistic Research. Texts 2001-2011*. Acta Scenica 28. Helsinki: Theatre Academy Helsinki.
<https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/37613>
- Arons, Wendy and May, Theresa J. 2012. *Readings in Performance and Ecology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barrett, Estelle and Barbara Bolt. (eds.) 2014. *Material Inventions. Applying Creative Arts Research*. I.B. Tauris.
- Barrett, Estelle and Barbara Bolt (eds.) 2010 [2007]. *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. London and New York: Tauris.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter, a political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.) 2011. *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bolter, Jay David & Grusin, Richard. 2000. *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. MIT Press.
- Borgdorff, Henk. 2012. *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge, UK; Malden MA: Polity Press.
- Casid, Jill H. 2011. “Epilogue: Landscape in, around, and under the periperformative” in *Women and Performance* Vol. 21 Number 1 March 2011, 97-116.
- Cubitt, Sean and Salma Monani (eds.) *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. Routledge 2013.
- DeLue, Rachel Ziady and Elkins, James 2008. (eds.) *Landscape Theory*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Dezeuse, Anna. 2002. “Origins of the Fluxus Score. From Indeterminacy to the ‘Do-it-yourself’ Artwork.” *Performance Research On Fluxus* vol 7 no 3, 78–94.

- Freeman, John. (ed.) 2010. *Blood, Sweat & Theory – Research through practice in performance*. LondOn: Libri Publishing.
- Friedman, Ken. 1990. *Fluxus Workbook*. Oslo: El Djarida.
- Fuchs, Elinor & Una Chaudhuri 2002. *Land/Scap/Theatre*. University of Michigan Press.
- Giannachi, Gabriella and Nigel Stewart. 2005. (eds.). *Performing Nature – Explorations in Ecology and the Arts*. Bern: Peter Lang AB.
- Guattari, Félix. 2000. *The Three Ecologies*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Higgins, Hannah. 2002. *Fluxus Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hill, Leslie and Helen Paris. 2006. (eds.). *Performance and Place*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kaye, Nick. 2000. *Site-specific art - performance, place, documentation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kershaw, Baz. 2007. *Theatre Ecology – Environments and Performance Events*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leiderstam, Matts 2006. *See and Seen Seeing Landscape through Artistic Practice*. Doctorial Studies and Research in Fine and Performing Arts no.2. Malmö: Lund University
- Marder, Michael 2015 The Place of Plants: Spatiality, Movement, Growth. *Performance Philosophy* Vol 1 (2015):185-194.
- Marder, Michael. 2013. *Plant-Thinking. A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nelson, Robin (ed.) 2013. *Practice as Research in the Arts – Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pearson, Mike. 2010. *Site-specific Performance*. London: Routledge
- Robinson, Julia E. 2002. "The Brechtian Event Score – a Structure in Fluxus." *Performance Research* 7: 3, 111–123.
- Riley, Shannon Rose and Lynette Hunter (eds.) 2009. *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research. Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Sand, Monika. 2008. *Konsten att Gunga: Experiment som aktiverar mellanrum*. Stockholm: Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan.
- Schwab, Michael. 2013. "Introduction." In Michael Schwab (ed.) *Experimental Systems. Future Knowledge in Artistic Research*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, pp. 5-14.
- Schwab, Michael and Henk Borgdorff (eds.) 2014. *The Exposition of Artistic Research – Publishing Art in Academia*. Leiden University Press.
- Wylie, John. 2007. *Landscape* London and New York: Routledge.

16.363 characters here