

# Stefan Tigges on This is not a garden by Lisa Hinterreithner

## Scenic/choreographed anthropocene figures of thought

“If a thousand forms of acting inspire the earth, then why did one want to imagine it as essentially lifeless and inanimate? [...] Can we gain the ability to keep to the earth’s own animacy?” (Bruno Latour)[\[1\]](#)

The contours of the Anthropocene age and its complex and intertwined consequences become increasingly acute and substantial. Likewise, the challenges and urgent responsibilities are growing which result from this shift in awareness and new insights concerning our (blue) planet as a whole, as well as us humans – or better, us as *terrestrials* (Latour).

In this context the following starting points, which mostly interact directly and discharge high potential for discourse, appear elementary to me and help to lay a playful-reflective foundation for Lisa Hinterreithner’s work.

Earth is, as Jürgen Renn and Bernd Scherer also state, neither “mere resource” nor “stable environment”, nor a “backdrop to our actions” by which, thus the decisive cesura, the history of mankind through bleaching of the Holocene transforms into a highly dynamic *history of the earth*.[\[2\]](#)

The point of interest is that in this process humanity is on the one hand strongly valorised as protagonist/subject by finally being made entirely responsible for its momentous interventions in earth/nature, and – alas – still only conditionally incriminated for them, in the shape of a double-tracked movement of thought that may appear to us like a complex multiple exposure. On the other hand, the importance of humanity’s part in our terrestrial cosmos dwindles considerably by a focus on non-human life, in that animals and plants now gradually receive the attention due to them and thus – another significant side effect – the/our *nature-culture relationship* has to be conceived (fully) anew. To put it pointedly with Bruno Latour’s words: “The *anthropos* of the Anthropocene is nothing more than the dangerous fiction of a universal player acting as unified mankind.”[\[3\]](#)

How then, thus the decisive question with regard to aesthetics, to incite or bring into play alternative and first of all contemporary spaces of thought and action which touch ecological, economical, social, ethical, and political dimensions, and take them into consideration regarding their cooperation – without their fatiguing in old patterns of representation? And what can these advanced discursive and proactive spaces look like in the arts and perform / emerge mature and sustainable?

In connection with these questions, a brief look into the new *Natural Contract* devised by Michel Serres is worthwhile, which is less a naive-seeming utopian gesture than it formulates concrete questions and seminal conduct instructions, which again liberate creative potential and thus also touch the arts.

Here a few brief excerpts, which as profound thought fragments also play a part in the open artistic search movements of Lisa Hinterreithner.

Michel Serres, who by stressing that we “receive gifts (*dons*) from the world, inflict damage (*dommage*) on it, which the earth then returns in the shape of new given factors (*données*)”

also (in-)directly touches current discourses of care and mindfulness, first of all asks: “Does one still have to prove that our intellect violates the world? Does it no longer feel the vital need for beauty? Beauty requires peace; peace presumes a new contract.”[4]

This path to a new, (more) peaceful attitude/solution is – and this is hardly surprising – highly charged with conflict, as it demands a radical change of the social system, attacks the existing legal order, and thus adjusts the existing social contract significantly: “So, back to nature! Which means complementing the exclusive social contract with a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity, at the conclusion of which our relationship with things relinquishes its dominance and its greed in favour of rapt listening, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect, where insight does not presuppose property, and acting does not require dominance nor its stercoral results or conditions. [...] The parasite takes everything and gives nothing; the host gives everything and takes nothing. The right of sovereignty and property is reduced to parasitism. On the other hand, the right of symbiosis is signified by reciprocity: as much as nature gives to humankind, as much humankind must restore to it, which has now become a legal entity.”[5]

The process and the forms of (artistic) negotiation of this restoration, whose ethical implications far surpass the question of the prerequisite understanding of nature as a legal entity, seem to point out especially a moment specific to forms of art, which they, entering into dialogue with the increasingly inter- and transdisciplinary acting natural sciences and humanities, are able to bring into play as creative capital: the *sensual* scope and discourse potential, which moreover may sensitise *social* framing processes. This moment is also stressed by Bernd Scherer, who advocates new artistically-aesthetically influenced knowledge systems, which again (un-)conditionally require the revocation of the separation of natural sciences and cultural sciences / humanities: “The aesthetic methods of the artists thus enable new, differentiated, sensual approaches to phenomena which up to now were not, or could not be determined conceptually, and with this propagate new forms of representation. Through them, the planet-wide processes entangled in local developments, and thus scaling processes of the Anthropocene, which normally are controlled via data and algorithms, can be experienced and grasped. Finally, they articulate many seemingly abstract processes whose effects are destructive by reconnecting them to concrete individual and social experiences.”[6]

As regards content, the performance artist Lisa Hinterreithner and her three co-performers Rotraud Kern, Sara Lanner and Linda Samaraweerová with *This is not a garden* place themselves in the discourses delineated above in order to consciously negotiate them choreographically with noticeable care for, and with the audience, in the shape of a blurring “human-vegetable utopia and dystopic reality”, as the programme flyer says. By means of her immersive/participatory as well as installation-based setting, she gently highlights the social dimension in the shape of individual/collective participation and the sensitisation of perception processes, i.e., the sensually charged moment of smelling, of tasting, and especially of transcorporeal touching/feeling with vegetable forms, which the performers bring into play, as aesthetic experience.

Even at the beginning of the two-hour performance it shows that the gymnasium of the “Creative Cluster” (temporarily) resident in the 5th district of Vienna functions as a hierarchy-free *rehearsal stage* or *scenic test arrangement* without central perspective, which one experiences on the one hand as a “retreat for humans and plants”, and on the other hand as a processional unfolding quiet/sustainable heterotopic space of discourse.

The performance's structures are as clear as its rules. The audience is led into the gymnasium together by the performers, and after a short address of welcome positioned in several small groups sitting at low tables distributed in the room, where playful interactions are instigated in parallel, after which the groups change tables repeatedly.

The table arrangements again form individual, island-like worlds with an intimate life of their own, which over the course of the performance grow together, the room, which gets more and more filled and played with plants, becoming a *landscape* which can also be perceived as a developing/temporary (utopian) *artistic biotope* – not as an *artificial biotope*.

An *artistic biotope* in the sense of a resident native vegetable world that is neither domesticated nor colonialised nor exhibited as setting nor (over-)aestheticised, which the title of the work already hints at. Analogous to this, the natural materials coming into play and later mostly returned to their natural surroundings, such as straw, branches, moss, herbs, clay and plants, are not to be conceived as props, but as non-human (animate) beings and equal subjects who with their reality / their independent existence enter into a dialogue, or better, a *metabolic exchange* with us terrestrials.

In the course of the performance, which is underpinned by an (atmospheric) sound collage (Lisa Kortschak, Elise Mory) structuring the room, the audience is invited, e.g., to make sculptures from branches on the tables, touch moss, leave a handprint in moist clay reminding one of a biological footprint, feel plants, smell herbs, lay down under blankets of foliage or tree-branch tents, or to choose their own rather contemplative/meditative positions (often reclining) in the natural landscape near the end of the performance. In addition, the audience may choose to put on headphones at tables and follow a podcast previously recorded by Lisa Hinterreithner and created in joint research with Markus Gradwohl, which among other things asks whether, or how, plants perceive humans (as a threat).

In the second part of the podcast, the threat is substantiated by way of the *colonisation of plants*, which among other things is shown by the fact that plants which are torn out of their natural habitat and transferred to alien natural and cultural environments, may lose their old functions and meanings, and also that their original appellations are renamed with Latin terms.

This form of *colonisation* again reminds us of the beginning of capitalist plantation industry, in which not only vegetable products were standardised, but also the employed slaves were sold on and their identity consciously erased by their new owners by changing their names.

The performance, which is bathed in dimmed, relaxed light and noticeably plays with the experience of time, hints at another moment, too, which receives increasing focus in the contemporary performative arts due to the growing societal pressure of reality/time: *varieties of slowing down*, which not only re-sharpen our perception, but perhaps may also offer utopian (playfully advanced) potential. Julian Pörksen observes “that the suspension of compulsory time-utilisation may lead to an aesthetic condition of informal, playful contemplation, to a mode of being in which nothing is wanted, nothing expected”<sup>[7]</sup>.

In connection with this, one should ask among other things whether, and how exactly these artistically founded conditions contribute to a (sensual) reassessment, and perhaps an active re-formation of our *nature-culture relationship*.

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[1] Bruno Latour, *Kampf um Gaia. Acht Vorträge über das neue Klimaregime*, Frankfurt am Main 2020, p. 114, 474. In English: *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Cambridge 2017.

[2] Jürgen Renn, Bernd Scherer (eds.), *Das Anthropozän. Zum Stand der Dinge*, Berlin 2015, p. 14.

[3] Latour 2020 (op. cit.), p. 415.

[4] Michel Serres, *Der Naturvertrag*, Frankfurt am Main 1994/2015, p. 76, 47. In English: *The Natural Contract*, University of Michigan Press 1995.

[5] Ibid., p. 68f.

[6] Bernd Scherer, *Denkbilder und Handlungsmuster des Anthropozäns*, Berlin 2022, p. 150.

[7] Julian Pörksen, *Verschwende deine Zeit*, Berlin 2013, p. 103.