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Authentic trees? – Artistic research, non-human collaborators and the documentary

Choosing to perform with 'real trees' on location, in the places where they actually grow, might seem like an exaggerated striving for authenticity, at least from a fictional perspective. In performing with plants, sitting in trees, or standing next to trees, as in the example *Trees in Victoria* discussed here, the wish to pose with other-than-human co-performers is not primarily related to their authenticity as something genuine, as opposed to the artificial, crafted or pretended in a fiction. Not completely unlike the type of outsourcing that can happen when using amateur performers, or real-life settings, the trees that I pose with provide nevertheless something that is not self-consciously performing as humans might do. In the examples to be discussed there is also something 'authentic' in the sense of being at least to some extent beyond the control of the artist. There are various ways to understand authenticity in this case, like that which takes place of itself, or that which has grown to be as it is now over time. By choosing trees, living beings that cannot deny their consent to pose for a camera with me, and foregrounding them together with a semi-abstracted human figure, I am not primarily looking for authenticity. There is, however, an attempt at creating relatively unmanipulated documents of simple performances, which could be understood as a documentary of sorts. The problem of authenticity within documentary cinema is a discourse of its own, which forms one of the backdrops for this exploration, although not really my area of expertise.

Moreover, authenticity has not really been part of my active vocabulary, probably because my so-called formative years as an artist happened in post-modern and post-structuralist times. Authenticity was too related to existentialist (Heideggerian) philosophy and to old-school pedagogues who wanted us to find our authentic voice as artists, while we wanted to provoke and play around with masks and disguises. Authenticity was somehow

linked to traditional notions of theatre and fiction, where realism and an impression of authenticity, were considered the highest good. Nevertheless, one could see my move from theatre to performance art and further to video, from constructing life-like environments in indoor venues to documenting slices of life in the landscape, as a move towards an authenticity of sorts, a form of the real.

After this personal preamble this text takes a winding route from authenticity to Apollo Bay, from artistic research to agential realism, via intra-action and agential cuts to framing in documentary film and back.

Trees in Victoria

The performances with fir trees in Victoria, standing next to them in wide shots and recording their bark in close-ups, took place in July 2016 during a trip on the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, southern Australia, after the PSi #22 (Performancre Studies International) conference Performing Climates in University of Melbourne (6-9.7.2016). The performances were recorded in two small coastal towns, namely Apollo Bay and Lorne, off season, in the Australian winter. The material was edited into the two-channel installation *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay) 1 and 2* (14 min 30 sec.) and the two-channel installation *Trees in Victoria (Lorne) 3 and 4* (13 min 40 sec.). The videos were also combined into the split-screen videos *Trees in Victoria (Apollo Bay)* 2017 and *Trees in Victoria (Lorne)* 2017. The split screen videos have been shown in a small exhibition in the old Telegraph on Harakka Island in Helsinki (3.-12.8.2018), in Art Fair Suomi, also Helsinki (23-26.5.2019) and the latter one also at Videoforma 7 festival (9.11.2019) in St. Petersburg.

Performing with plants

At the time of recording *Trees in Victoria* I was preparing for an artistic research project, related to trees called Performing with Plants, but had not yet commenced working on it. The English abstract of the research application from 2016 summarizes the project as follows:

> "Performing with plants" is an artistic research project aiming to investigate the

question "how to perform landscape today?". A post-humanist perspective prompts us to rethink the notion of landscape, and to realize that the surrounding world consists of life forms and material phenomena with differing degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing landscape could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements, like singular trees, and explore what could be done together with them.

The most important inquiries to be explored are: 1) How to collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants? 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? An overarching research topic is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the insights generated by post-humanist and new-materialist research?

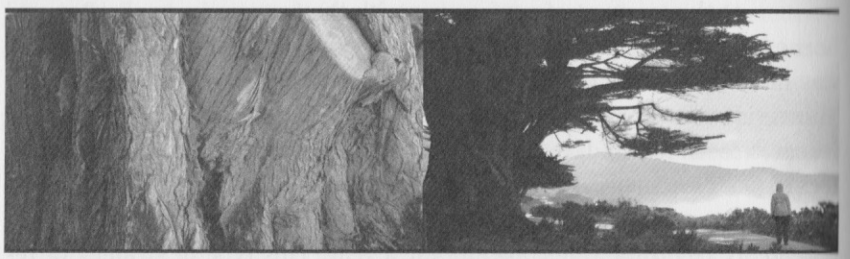
The aim of the project is to develop techniques generated during previous work by the applicant, i.e. the twelve-year project *Animal Years* (2002-2014), where focus was on showing changes in the landscape over time, rather than collaboration with the trees. By collaborating with plants more sensitively and ecologically, sustainable modes of performing can be developed, in order to serve as inspiration and provocation regarding ways of understanding our surrounding world.

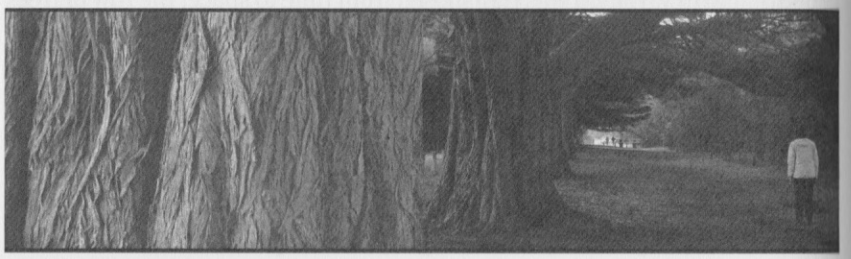
Some sense of how the project developed and turned out can best be gained from the ongoing project archive in the Research Catalogue, online (Performing with Plants project website).

At the moment of performing with the fir trees in Apollo Bay and Lorne I did not know whether the project would receive funding or not, but was in any case orienting myself to work with plants and especially trees. These video works were not part of the project and were not made with a research focus in mind, but rather simply as artistic exploration. The main technique I had used in previous works like *Animal Years,* mentioned above, was creating time-lapse videos showing changes in the landscape by repeatedly recording the same site for a year. This type of strategy of repeated visits was not possible during a short trip. Therefore, the method of repetition with variation was transposed from time to space; the row of trees along the road and the shoreline provided a spatial sequence of repetition with variation to record as such.

In Apollo Bay I recorded the row of trees during one rainy day. In Lorne I noticed a row of similar trees in a park near the shore and decided to make a sequel, although the grass and the picnic tables completely changed the character of the images there. (See images 1 and 2).In Apollo bay I moved along the road recording my standing next to each tree in the order they were growing, with the sea to the right. In Lorne the sea shore on the right is not visible behind the hedges, though. And after each moment of standing next to the tree in a wide shot I moved the tripod close to that same tree and recorded a close-up of its bark. This focus on close-ups of the tree trunks, to be paired with wide shots of me standing next to the tree was new, something I had not tried before. I had explored close-ups of lichen earlier that year (discussed in Arlander 2018) but not systematically, like here. Thus, two series of images were created, one with the wide shots and another with the close-ups. The wide shot images do not show the trees in full, but nevertheless give an idea of their size. The close-ups look almost like still-images; sometimes an insect crawls across the trunk, but mostly the viewer can only follow the patterns and crevices of the bark. The color of the bark in the close-ups sometimes takes on strange hues, due to my use of the automatic light meter and white balance functions of the camera.

I never found out what these fir trees are called, their particular species, although I guessed they were firs. Therefore, I decided to call the works *Trees in Victoria* rather than "Fir trees in Victoria" or the like. These works were made as "ordinary" artworks. Why do I discuss them in the context of artistic research?





Artistic research and agential realism

The borders between the identities and the horizons of activity for artists and scholars have become liquid; demarcations between an artwork, a curated exhibition, a research practice shared in a community, a performance and a scholarly publication have become increasingly challenging. Following Karen Barad (2007) We could say that making art and doing research are entangled and differentiated through specific intra-actions (Barad 2007) differently in each case. In this situation a blunt opposition between artistic research and art research is insufficient, because it assumes the separation of art and research in art to begin with. As art can have other roles in various research constellations besides being the object of research, we have to think of the shared terrain of artistic research and arts research in a new way. This has been discussed more thoroughly in Finnish (Arlander & Elo 2017). The same, however, could be said of the demarcations between artistic practice and artistic research. The example I have described was not conceived as artistic research, but rather as artistic exploration. It turned into a preparatory work for the actual research project, however, and could even be considered more interesting or relevant than many of the experiments that were part of the project itself.

From the point of view of research, the erosion of an anthropocentric world view is linked to acknowledging the fact that knowledge is produced in complicated circumstances where non-human factors and actors play an important role. The central question becomes how research actions that take place in the terrain of art, besides being dependent of their context also effect changes in the horizon of expectations, how they modify the starting points and practices of both art and research. Applying the thinking of physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad on research in the arts, we can, rather than focus on the interplay of art and research in terms of inter-action, instead focus on their intra-action, to use the term coined by Barad to designate the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. From that perspective art and research are constituted in relationship to each other, and one has to analyze how they are differentiated in each situation. We could say that how research in the arts in each case is differentiated, what in each situation is articulated as art making, arts research, artistic research or practice-based research in art is defined through specific intra-actions or agential cuts specific to each situation.

Barad is especially interesting in the context of artistic research, as she proposes a new understanding of how discursive practices are related to the material world. While performative accounts by social and political theorists focus on the productive nature of social practices, Barad's agential realism acknowledges that the forces at work in the materialization of bodies are not only social, and that the bodies produced are not all human (Barad 2007, 33-34). Barad's agential realism is based on quantum physicist Niels Bohr's idea that material experimental arrangements must be regarded as an inseparable part of the phenomenon that is analyzed as well as the concepts describing it. Continuing the thinking of Michel Foucault Barad proposes that "the primary ontological units are not 'things' [choses] but phenomena – dynamic topological reconfigurings/ entanglements/relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not 'words' [mots] but material-discursive practices, through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted." (Barad 2007, 141).

Intra-actions and agential cuts

According Barad there are no predetermined subjects and objects (for example a researcher and her research object), which could inter-act with each

other, form networks or assemblages; both observer and observed are constituted through specific intra-actions (Barad 2007, 340). She explains:

> "Intra-actions include the larger material arrangement (i.e., a set of material practices) that effect an *agential cut* between 'subject' and 'object' (in contrast to the more familiar Cartesian cut which takes this distinction for granted). That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological or semantic indeterminacy" (Barad, 2007, 139-140).

The boundaries and properties of the 'components' of phenomena become determinate through specific agential intra-actions, she notes, and in that way particular material articulations of the world become meaningful. A specific intra-action, which involves a specific material configuration of the 'apparatus', enacts an agential cut, effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object'. The agential cut resolves the ontological and semantic indeterminacy. (Barad 2007, 333-334.) This means, to put it simply, that differences are made, not found, and dichotomies derive from specific cuts (Barad 2012 a, 77.). The boundaries and properties of the parts of a phenomenon become determinate only in the enactment of an agential cut that delineates the 'measured object' from the 'measuring agent'.

A measurement is the intra-active marking of one part of a phenomenon by another; nothing in the nature of a measurement makes it irreducibly human-centred (Barad 2007, 338.). No human observers are required, because 'observer' and 'observed' are merely two physical systems intra-acting in the marking of the 'effect' by the 'cause'. Humans may emerge as part of such practices but they are not necessary. Objectivity is a matter of accountability to marks on bodies. The accountability to marks on bodies is crucial for Barad, that is, an accounting of the apparatuses that enact determinate causal structures, boundaries, properties, and meanings (Barad 2007, 340.). She stresses the importance of "*the proper accounting of agential cuts within the specific phenomenon in question,*" and the key point for her is "that *agential separability is enacted only within a particular phenomenon*" (Barad 2007, 345.). Although there are no determinate, pre-existing entities with determinate properties, there are determinate marks on bodies produced through specific intra-actions—and these need to be accounted for.

Barad further specifies the nature of agential cuts as follows: "Intra-actions enact agential cuts, which are a cutting together-apart (that is, entangling-differentiating), as one move (not sequential acts)." Although this seems paradoxical, "it goes to the very nature of the agential cut, which cross-cuts itself," she states (Barad 2012 a, 80.). Moreover, "the world can never characterize itself in its entirety; it is only through different enactments of agential cuts, different differences, that it can come to know different aspects of 'itself'" (Barad 2007, 432, chapter 4, footnote 42.). We cannot study or look at everything at once: "Only a part of the world can be made intelligible to itself at a time, because the other part of the world has to be the part that it makes a difference to" (ibid.). Therefore, it is important for an artist-researcher to focus on articulating the apparatuses used, the specific agential cuts enacted and especially the marks on bodies generated.

Barad suggests that "All bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity, its performativity, she writes. "Boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted through the intra-activity of mattering" (Barad 2012, 69). Because "different agential cuts materialize different phenomena – different marks on bodies – our intra-actions ... contribute to the differential mattering of the world" (Barad 2007, 178). These agential cuts are not enacted by wilful individuals but by the larger material arrangement of which they are a part. Barad insists that we are responsible for the cuts that we help to enact, not because we choose or are being chosen but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe. This also means that "'others' are never very far from 'us'; 'they' and 'we' are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts 'we' help to enact" (Barad, 2007, 179).

Differentiating is not about radical exteriorities, not about 'othering' or separating, but about making connections and commitments: "the very nature of materiality itself is an entanglement. Hence, what is on the other side of the agential cut is never separate from us." (Barad 2012, 69). We are responsible to others we are entangled with through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails: "Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities. Even the smallest cuts matter" (ibid.). Ethics is not about the right response to a radically exteriorized other; it is about responsibility and accountability for the relationalities of which we are a part (ibid.).

The fact that humans are emergent phenomena, like all other physical systems, does not diminish our responsibility, for Barad, as all situations

entail an ethical obligation. We have to intra-act responsibly in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering (Barad 2007, 235). To intra-act responsibly means understanding that 'we' are not the only active beings – although this in no way deflects our responsibility (Barad 2007, 391). The challenge to intra-act responsibly in the world as a human being without assuming a humanist subject who can freely choose is not easy to realize in practice, (compare Arlander 2014), especially in the context of art, where subjective choice has traditionally been given a rather central role.

Knowing and being

Barad is also relevant for artistic research because of her insistence that knowing and being are inseparable and entwined with ethics. Barad emphasizes that practices of *knowing* and *being* are mutually implicated, and she introduces the term *onto-epistemology* to describe the study of practices of knowing in being (Barad 2007, 334). Many artistic researchers will probably agree with 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). For her, separating epistemology from ontology is part of "a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse" (ibid.). Barad suggests we need "something like an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing and being" (ibid.). For her,

> 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, 56)

Following physicist Niels Bohr, she maintains that apparatuses are productive of the phenomena they measure. This does not mean, however, that reality is a product of human concepts; rather, concepts are specific material arrangements (Barad 2007, 334). Knowing is a physical practice of

engagement: "Scientific practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest" (Barad 2007, 336). In a similar manner, artistic practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest. The artist-researcher is literally producing phenomena – artworks or performances – and not only observing them.

Barad's ideas can be interpreted as a challenge to account for the cuts of inclusion and exclusion we make, the apparatuses we use and are used by, as well as the marks on bodies generated by them. The artist-researcher, too, must ask, how do I account for the apparatuses I use and for the marks on bodies they create? It is not enough to acknowledge one's subjectivity and entanglement with the object of research; one must also try to account for the agential cuts within the phenomena at hand; that is, what is included and what is excluded from mattering. And, in a wider sense, we can demand the similar accountability concerning the differentiations between artistic practice, artistic research and other types of research that we make. How are art and research constituted in relationship to each other, how do they intra-act and differentiate, what matters and what is excluded from mattering in each case? What kind of agential cuts define artistic phenomena in each situation and each operational environment? How do we understand the environment of our activity when we are examining ontological entanglements that are understood as phenomena of art? And how should we understand authenticity in this context? Is it at all compatible with the agential realism proposed by Barad? Let us make a detour to documentary film before trying to address that.

Framing

In my example, *Trees in Victoria*, one key question related to matters of inclusion and exclusion is the framing of the image. The frame literally creates a cut between what is included in the image and what is excluded. I have discussed agential cuts in the context of my artistic practice elsewhere (Arlander 2018) as well as the problem of framing when working with such large collaborators as trees (Arlander 2019). Framing is relevant topic in the discourse of documentary film. In her recent study *Soul of the Documentary - Framing, Expression, Ethics* Ilona Hongisto (2015) "distinguishes the documentary from other cinematic modalities" by "its involvement with a world that continues beyond the film's frame." (Hongisto 2015, 11) Although I did not engage with the trees on multiple levels or over a longer period of time in a manner that documentary film makers might do with their subjects,

the trees inevitably go on with their lives beyond the short moments I was posing for camera with them. Hongisto further notes how, "prevailing understandings of documentary cinema tend to posit the world depicted in documentary films as relatively stable and thus rationally verifiable" and "to freeze process in order to make it available for further investigation." (Ibid.). In contrast with this view, she posits "the real depicted in documentary films as dynamic in its own right and adjusts the idea of documentary cinema accordingly." (Ibid.). Hongisto's idea of a dynamic world is compatible with the agential realism discussed above. But what about authenticity?

The world of the fir trees in my example is undoubtedly depicted as fairly static, at least on a superficial level. The frozen impression is on the one hand due to the relatively slow movements of the trees and the human performer sharing their stillness for a moment, and on the other hand a result of using a static camera on tripod and relatively long takes. The repetition might further increase the static effect, although the aim is rather the contrary. By repeating a very similar pose and framing with each tree, the changes in the images from one to the other, and the differences and specific features of each tree are highlighted. The dynamism of a temporal process is transposed onto a spatial sequence, the constant changes and variations do not happen in time but from one tree to the next.

Hongisto stresses the importance of framing and argues that "documentary cinema captivates viewers not so much because of the claims that it makes, but because it constantly reminds us that the real is not limited to what is directly perceivable in the images." (Hongisto 2015, 12) She further observes how "[f]raming institutes a threshold to a world of becoming rich in the transformative potential", which in turn "reorients the ethical stakes of documentary cinema from producing accurate and authentic representations to creatively contributing to the transformability of actual beings in the real". (Ibid.). According her "framing is the performative practice with which documentary cinema participates in and contributes to the real as process." (Ibid.) It seems that we need to disentangle the idea of authenticity from accuracy as well as from representations.

Although the framing of my images of the fir trees presumably does not contribute in any substantial way to the lives of these trees, I like to think that it might contribute to the viewers ideas of trees and how they tend to be depicted. The wide shots, while presenting the human figure in full (a recognizable measure of size), show only a small part of the trees and their crown, but enough of the base of their trunk to give an idea of their size and to make clear that most of the tree remains outside the frame. The size of

the image was actually regulated by the distances between the trees, how wide could the shot be without including the previous tree in the row. In some sense the wide shots are not wide enough for the trees. The close-ups, on the contrary, highlight the specificity and individuality of each tree and demand the viewer to attend to the details of the bark, while suggesting that this detail is a tiny part of the huge trunk. The long duration of the close-ups give emphasis to the demand. Because the framing is repeated as relatively similar with each tree, in a repetition with variation, the attention of the viewer is directed to each tree as a separate entity, a new event. Perhaps the close-ups of the bark remind some viewers of human or animal skin; each image, each tree, is similar and very different at the same time.

In her concluding remarks, Hongisto discusses ethics:

> "Documentary cinema operates in the real by framing it and, therefore, also engages with what remains beyond the frame. This endows documentary films with a particular agency in the real and issues them with a related ethical prerogative. Framing comes with the double bond of capturing and expressing, which locates documentary agency in capturing the world in its becoming and expressing it as a sensation of the real's continuous unfolding." (Hongisto 2015, 135)

Hongisto is particularly interested in cases where a documentary "intervenes in the real as process" and "highlights that the lives and events depicted in its frames continue beyond the film". (Hongisto 2015, 135) In my example I did not intervene in the lives of the fir trees on the shore in Apollo Bay and Lorne in any substantial way, although they certainly do live their lives beyond my recording their bark and my standing next to them. Hongisto's point seems far removed from such simple gestures, but the framing in these video works does intervene in the real as a process in other ways. Already the choice of subjects, or collaborators, the fir trees, could be considered an intervention in the real. In the two-channel installations and especially the split screen versions the juxtaposition of the close-up (to the left) and the wide shot (to the right) makes the problem of framing explicit. The framing is either "too close" or "not wide enough" to be transparent and forgotten, and thus becomes a topic of its own.

"The ethical stakes in working with the vibrant and expressive nature of the real - its perpetual becoming - have to do with harnessing process into a sensation that the world could be different," Hongisto (2015, 135) writes. Although her remark could perhaps primarily be related to the political activism of documentary filmmakers in the face of the multiple crises at hand, I nevertheless like to think that I am actually showing the world as being different already. By using repetition with variation as a tool, one can actually show the world, or rather parts of the world, as a continuous differentiation going on. Regardless of my example, we could perhaps say that this kind of approach to working with the real makes sense in terms of authenticity if we understand it as a form of agency in becoming.

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