

Workshop with a Pine

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Abstract

This text is based on a workshop called 'Attending to Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees', that took place at the 13th SAR (Society for Artistic Research) conference at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Germany 30 June–3 July 2022. The workshop had as its starting point the artistic research project 'Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees' and focused on trees in the immediate vicinity of the conference. This text is centered on three letters or talks to a pine tree at the entrance to Park an der Ilm before and during the workshop. The videos and sound recordings are available on the Research Catalogue.

Keywords: tree, pine, meeting, pondering, writing to, talking with

Attending, Mending, or Blending?

This workshop takes as its starting point the artistic research project 'Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees' in order to focus attention on trees in the immediate vicinity of the conference venue. Besides trying to mend our broken relationship to other beings that we share this world with and constantly blend in with trans-corporeal exchanges, this exercise in attention to trees can be used as a creative tool to assist concentration and focus, as well as a sense of embodied connection with the environment. The project's title refers to the photographic work of Thomas Pakenham, who in turn played on the title of a book by George Gurdjieff. The fields of critical plant studies and environmental post-humanities as well as the philosophical study of plant thinking and the scientific debates regarding plant intelligence seem like obvious contact points, although these fields are not always so welcoming of this kind of practical artistic exploration. Meanwhile, developed in the border zone between performance art, environmental art and digital video or media art, the project is in some sense lacking a proper 'home' to contend with and to expand from. Depending on your perspective you could ask: Why is the human body there to attract attention from the trees? Where is the exploration of new technology and biological processes? What is the critical focus, the analytic disclosure, the intellectual paradox pointed at? On a deeper level this presentation seeks to ask: What artistic tradition, field or discipline should this practice actually connect to, what artistic forerunners should it reference? And what consequences would those choices have on the further development of the project?

The above abstract can be found in the conference programme.¹ The following text is based on the workshop that took place on 2 July in Van der Velde Bau and in the nearby Park an der Ilm. The workshop was structured in three parts: an introduction, an assignment, and a conversation. In pre-

paring for the workshop, I asked a pine tree for advice, and in this text, I will concentrate mainly on my ponderings with the pine tree, rather than the workshop as such or the contributions of the participants, although I will use my introduction to the workshop as material. But first a quote from the project description of *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, which explains the focus on individual trees:

Although we are often accused of 'not seeing the forest for the trees', this project wants to look at the opposite danger, of 'not seeing the trees for the forest' and focus on individual trees. This is not to deny that trees form networks and ecosystems or symbiotic relationships not only with other trees but with fungi, bacteria, and all kinds of micro-organisms, and are in a constant exchange with their environment, as humans are as well. Nor the fact that forests or woods or substantial areas of trees are needed for producing effective carbon sinks, cooler and fresher urban air, flood resistance and more. Emphasizing individualism is a risky strategy in our current neoliberal capitalist society, where the importance of individualism is exaggerated anyway. It can nevertheless be useful to focus on singular trees, as an important first step towards decolonizing our relationship with 'nature'. As late ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003) pointed out, colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between 'us' and 'them', and to see 'them' as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualised. Thus, attending to particular trees might work as a way to help us see trees as life forms that we have much in common with, despite our undeniable differences. (Arlander 2020a)

Some of the questions evoked by and strategies used in the project are described in the book *Performing and Thinking with Trees* (Arlander 2022b). At the time of the conference, however, I was already engaged in a new project called *Pondering with Pines*. This new project is an attempt to narrow the focus to pine trees and to work in a deliberately trilingual manner in English, Finnish, and Swedish (Arlander 2022a). The focus on pines inevitably influenced my approach to the workshop as well.

Preparing with a Pine Tree

Looking for a suitable pine tree to perform with while preparing for the workshop I found a beautiful pine near the entrance to the Park an der Ilm, and wrote a letter to it, asking for advice:

30.6.2022. Dear Pine tree, I am so happy I finally found you, after all. There are not so many pine trees in this beautiful old park on Ilm in Weimar. And it seems to me that you are planted here, because you are probably a cembra pine. I come to you today to ask for advice. There will be a workshop about attending to remarkable and unremarkable trees — forget about the title, remarkable and unremarkable are human follies, but this idea of attending is what concerns me, and that might concern you as well. During the workshop the participants can choose any tree they like. I am obsessed with pine trees, or so it seems, simply because I am engaged in a project called 'Pondering with

¹ See abstract and bio in the conference programme: <https://sar2022.uni-weimar.de/people#Annette-Arlander>

Pines'. What I am wondering is, and here I somehow would like your advice, should I ask the participants to take photos or make drawings or write poems or in some other manner represent their chosen trees and their encounter with them? Or should I take advantage of the opportunity of inviting the participants to show the trees to each other, to take the whole group to see and meet each of the chosen trees? That makes the time needed for the final sharing longer, and thus the time needed for finding and choosing the tree as well as the time to experience the encounter with them shorter. And after all, as artistic researchers most of us are dealing with some form of representations and that is what our tools and methods produce. But, but... it would be nice to have a live encounter anyway. Perhaps I should leave it open for the group to decide, dependent on the weather? Or is that the lazy way, not to decide by myself and avoid the responsibility of the choice? What do you think? There is a lawn mower working hard all around us now, so I am distracted, sorry for that. I hope you don't find the noise as irritating as I do. Thank you anyway for this moment with you, and I hope to be able to come back and visit you later, when the mowing is finished. Thank you and take care.

The above text is added to the video *With a Pine in Weimar*, filmed with my phone, because I did not have my camera with me. I also recorded spoken notes addressing the same topic and transcribed them for the same page on the Research Catalogue. (Arlander 2022c)

Dear pine or dear cembra pine, if you are a cembra pine. I tried to address you in writing, but now I will make a new attempt to address you by talking to you directly. There is a lawn mower working around the trees. And I hope it won't come here, closer. If it does, then I will come to you later. But the reason I visit you here at the entrance of the park, Park an der Ilm if I pronounce the name correctly in Weimar, Germany, is a workshop that is going to take place here in a few days that I am supposed to facilitate. My initial idea was to simply make a version of a workshop I've done previously through online instructions, inviting people to go out to a park and find a tree that feels somehow inviting to them, and then address that tree or ask that tree for advice — as I ask you know — either related to their research or whatever problems they feel like wanting to consider together with the pine or the tree. Because of course, the important thing is that it's my obsession to focus on pine trees. The participants can choose any tree they like, which makes it easier because there are not many pine trees here, but a lot of all trees of all kinds. Very beautiful. But I'm, what I'm wondering is how I should, how we should share what we have done? Should we share that, should I invite people to make representations of their encounters either drawings or poems or recordings or photographs or in some other manner, sort of, bring back something that represents or symbolizes the encounter they have experienced? Because after all, that's what most artists do, they create some sort of representations or objects or traces or whatever. But on the other hand, it would be so very seducing [sic], inviting to share the encounters by showing the

trees for real if they are ... somewhere in the vicinity. I'm sitting next to the main street here because you grow here by the entrance, but probably people would choose their trees further in the park. So, it might be quite a long walk to go and visit them all. I'm like in two minds. Of course, a lot depends on the weather, too. Or should I stick to representations and invite people to create a page on the Research Catalogue, uploading the stuff there. Or sending the stuff to me so I could upload it as part of the conference proceedings somehow, or as part of my project. I wonder if people would be willing to do that or if it would be more interesting to share the walk. When I'm sitting here, under you next to the trunk, and despite the nettles growing here, which are not so inviting, it feels very boring to think of going back indoors, so. But, on the other hand, there is a conference programme that we should stick to so we cannot be late for that. Maybe I have to play it by the ear and react to circumstances. At least I can claim that is your advice. I'm not sure if that is an advice that you now give me or is it something that I just wish to hear? The idea that I should leave it open and decide on the spot. But anyway, thank you for assisting me in formulating these considerations by providing the shade and the support, if nothing else, so thank you and bye-bye.

This pondering between representation and live exchange I will return to at the end.

Introduction to the Workshop

'What times are these, when a conversation about trees is almost a crime because it entails a silence about so many misdeeds!' (Brecht 1939)

With the risk of resorting to clichés, I began with that Brecht quote, which I remember well as a translation into Finnish from my student years. After brief introductions I explained the structure of the workshop: 1.) a short introduction and presentation, 2.) an individual assignment to find a tree, attend to it in your own manner and 'document' the encounter, and finally 3.) meeting together, sharing experiences and 'documents'. I also repeated the basic facts referring to the conference theme: The workshop takes as its starting point the artistic research project 'Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees' and will focus on trees in the immediate vicinity. Besides trying to *mend* our broken relationship to other beings that we share this world with and constantly 'blend' with in trans-corporeal (Alaimo 2010) exchanges, these exercises in 'attending' to trees or encounters with trees can be used as a creative tool to assist concentration and focus as well as a sense of embodied connection with the 'environment'.

The background to the workshop, the project 'Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees' (2020–21) is in its title referring to the photographic work of Thomas Pakenham, *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* (1996), who in turn plays with the title of a book by Gurdjeff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (English 1963). This project, where I spent time with specific trees and posed for camera together with them, formed a counterpoint to those works, through questioning what is remarkable and what remains unremarkable, while focusing on individual trees. The medium in

this project was not photography, but rather performance for video and recorded voice. Instead of describing the project, which was realized with the support of the Finnish Cultural Foundation in 2021, I referred to the project blog and the project archive online (Arlander 2020a). By adding the word 'unremarkable' to the title the project questions what life forms are considered remarkable and what forms are bypassed as unremarkable or uninteresting, as plants often are. While some trees are considered remarkable for their age, size, location, stories, et cetera, others can become so if you visit them repeatedly or attend to them in a specific manner.

Attending is here used in the sense of paying attention, while in other cases it can also mean serving, helping, or taking care of. During the project I experimented with attending to trees by creating a relationship to them, spending time with a particular tree or visiting the tree repeatedly for instance by breathing, listening, and performing for camera with a tree, or by practicing the two-legged tree pose in yoga with trees (Arlander 2022d), writing letters to trees while sitting next to them (Arlander 2023) or recording talking to them (Arlander 2021). What other modes of attending to trees could we explore? I asked the participants.

And what about the context? Despite the prevailing plant blindness (Allen 2003), which to some degree extends to trees as well, there has in recent years been a veritable vegetal turn (Cielemecka and Szczygielska 2019) in fields like critical plant studies, environmental post-humanities as well as the philosophical study of plant thinking (Marder 2013) and the scientific debates regarding plant intelligence. Not all academic fields are welcoming of practical artistic exploration, however, nor are all artistic disciplines open to interdisciplinary experiments. Rather than summarizing current discussions in critical plant studies, I referred to my presentation of them in the publication *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg with Environs* (Arlander 2020b) as well as *Performing and Thinking with Trees* (Arlander 2022b).

And the artistic tradition? Developed in the borderlands between performance art, environmental art, and digital video or media art, the project is in some sense lacking a proper home base to contend with and to expand. I repeated the questions in the abstract as possible criticism: Why is the human body there to attract attention from the trees? Where is the exploration of new technology and biological processes? What is the critical focus, the analytic disclosure, the intellectual paradox pointed at? I also mentioned the questions that really interest me personally, but were not a core concern of the workshop or for the participants, and therefore remain to be explored further in the future: What artistic tradition, field, or discipline should this practice connect to? What artistic forerunners should it reference? And what consequences would those choices have on the further development of the project?

To present some practical contact points and possible artistic references I mentioned the famous case of people writing love letters to trees, which had been given email addresses for the public to report problems related to the trees, in Melbourne (Burin 2018) and a public project deliberately collecting letters to trees instigated by the city of Vancouver.² In addition to these citizen engagements, I mentioned two art projects, Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder's (2018) suggestions for a practice of befriending

a tree and Katie Holten's (Brady 2019) drawing of a tree alphabet, which enables writing in trees rather than to them.

I concluded the introduction by briefly mentioning my current trilingual project, *Pondering with Pines — Miettii Mäntyjen kanssa — Funderar med furor*, which focuses on pine trees (rather than trees in general), on pondering (rather than performing in general) and on talking — recorded on site (rather than writing, and then reading and recording the text later).

The core questions of that project, so far, I simplified into the following: What does it mean to ponder with pines? How can it best be undertaken? Here too, in the interest of time, I referred to material online (Arlander 2022a). The main thing was the assignment, formulated as follows:

Go to a tree that seems inviting to you.
Attend to the tree in the manner you feel appropriate.
Represent the encounter in some manner.
Share something of your experience with the rest of us on returning.

Waiting with the Pine

In the park, during the workshop, while the participants went out to encounter a tree of their choice and to try to represent that encounter in some manner, I spent the time waiting for them with the pine tree. I recorded a brief note at the beginning and another one at the end of the forty-five minutes that were assigned for the exercise.

Saturday, second of July, quarter past three, or approximately quarter past three. Now we have started the workshop. There was an introduction in the room. And now all the participants have been sent away in the park to meet a tree and attend to that tree and perhaps represent that encounter in some manner. And I promised to stay here with you and wait for them when they come back, which is at the latest at four o'clock, so there is plenty of time. There is [sic] forty-five minutes to meet the tree and engage with it. I'm not going to talk with you, or record my talk with you for forty-five minutes, I just wanted to make this note and to somehow also try to acknowledge that you helped me in deciding how to design this workshop, which is very simple. The only task is to go out and attend to a tree and then come back and share something of the encounter. So, in that sense, if I would need to share something of our encounter, it could be this recording or this 'pondering'. But I also think that this [sic] is a good challenge for me to sit here with you or stand here or walk around with you for forty-five minutes and try to listen to you rather than talk (myself) all the time. So that's what I'm going to do now. And maybe talk to you later. Thank you.

Saturday second of July approximately quarter to four. Now in fifteen minutes people will start returning. And I've spent half an hour walking around your trunk slowly back and forth looking at your needles and your pinecones, both male and female, and also dry needles that remain sometimes in clusters but also all kinds of leaves or berries or things from other trees that the wind has just brought to your needles.

² See the City of Vancouver's web page
<https://www.cityofvancouver.us/publicworks/page/letters-trees>

And I realized that it might be quite uncomfortable to have all that rubbish hanging on you without being able to shake it off. I mean, not only your own dry needles, but anything that might land on you. Probably the wind will shake off some of the dead needles, especially higher up but on the low branches it's clear that needles from higher up have fallen and were meant to reach the ground but stayed on the lower branches now, as an extra weight but also preventing sun and water and air coming to the living fresh needles. Or I don't know. But if I approximate the human experience or extend it to others, then I wouldn't like having a lot of rubbish in my hair on my shoulders, or actually anything there. But that's not very much thinking as a result of thirty minutes of hanging around with you. But on the other hand, it is a pleasant place in your shade. So why not? So, thanks again. Enough for now. Bye.

After forty-five minutes we gathered and decided to take a walk in the park, everybody presented their chosen trees to each other and shared something of their experiences. The workshop was therefore 'short and sweet', and according to comments it was a pleasurable and rewarding experience. The main reason was probably that the objective of the workshop was simple, to try to encounter or create a relationship with a tree. There was no additional need to produce something together, nor did I ask the participants to generate material for me, as sometimes is the case. Nor did I even compile a page of documentation, as I had initially planned. With hindsight I do regret that I did not take notes of our discussions, nor did I keep any record of the brief presentations. I do remember some fragments of the discussion, however. For example, a local participant described the difficulties that come with maintaining a historical park in its original condition while circumstances, the surrounding vegetation and the climate have all changed substantially — an aspect I had not considered before.

Conclusion...

The interesting theme that emerges from my recordings and conversations with the pine concerns the choice between live encounters versus sharing accounts or representations. That was not something I had reflected on as a problem in advance. With hindsight it seems obvious that live sharing and showing of the participants' chosen trees was the most preferable option. Because I am so focused on documentation, recordings, and representations of performances in my own work, either by video, sound, or text and preferably all of them, I had overlooked the need for live conversation and embodied encounters, which is a major reason for attending conferences in the first place. And of course, the real reason to spend time with living trees is to experience them in the places where they grow.

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I



II

I
Annette Arlander, *With a Pine in Weimar*,
still from video (HD 16:9), performed and
recorded 30 June 2022 in Park an der Ilm,
Weimar, Germany

II
Annette Arlander, *Under the Pine*, photo
(4 × 3) taken 1 July 2022 in Park an der Ilm,
Weimar, Germany