



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## RESTING WITH PINES IN NIDA – ATTEMPTS AT PERFORMING WITH PLANTS

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In this text I am asking whether it is possible to respond to the challenge of a philosopher with artistic means and without attempting to philosophize or without trying to apply or illustrate the philosopher's ideas. How, I wonder, could such a response be communicated in a journal? Is it possible to demonstrate the thinking that takes place in performances designed for a camera via visual media, or is verbal description the only alternative? How can one avoid turning the demonstration into some form of critical studies, or into an artist talk that remains within the realm of work stories rather than amounting to a visual argument?

The challenge that serves as a starting point for the following reflections was formulated by philosopher Michael Marder, in his text 'The Place of Plants: Spatiality, Movement, Growth' (Marder 2015) based on a talk given at the opening of the exhibition *Plant Science* in 2013. The challenge to artists, published in volume 1 of this journal, 'to include the spatiality, movement, and perspective of the vegetal in their work' (Marder 2015, 192) will serve as my prompt, although the artworks used as examples by Marder are approaching the issue of working with the vegetal in a rather different manner than the works I will present here. He focuses on artworks that use vegetal growth as material for installations that investigate the relationship of the human body and the vegetal.

The sequence that inspired me to respond to or enter into a dialogue with Marder is formulated as a series of questions at the end of his text where he notes that, '[i]n addition to engaging with the products of growth, artists can plug their work into the process of growth, broadly understood as a striving' and continues:

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What would it mean for a performance, or for another artistic practice, to strive like a plant in all directions at once, excessively, and with the utmost spatial or corporeal attention paid to every inch of the place where it unfolds? Where is the border between concentration and scattering here? And how can we first throw ourselves into such a performance or creative act, the way a seed is sown without any guarantee that it would germinate? What would need to be set up for this kind of performance to grow, to extend its reach, while remaining rooted in the context wherein it first cropped up? What would its modular self-complication or self-replication in this place, which I have provocatively analogized to the Baroque, entail? And how, if at all, would it engage with the plants themselves? (193)

There is a whole cluster of challenges here—besides the overall challenge of engaging with plants in some manner, there is the focus on the place or site, the reference to striving in all directions, the balance between concentration and scattering, outreach and rootedness, a focus on action without guarantees, as well as the idea of modular self-complication or self-replication—all of which resonate in some manner with the rather simple and mundane practice to be described in the following.

Moreover, this challenge can be placed within a broader demand to artists and scholars alike to investigate ways of collaborating with creatures in our shared surroundings, to find ways of relating to the environment that are meaningful from ecological, new materialist and posthumanist perspectives. Perhaps artistic research (Borgdorff 2012; Schwab 2013; Biggs and Karlsson 2011), creative arts research (Barrett and Bolt 2010, 2014) or performance as research (Allegue et al. 2009, Riley and Hunter 2009; Freeman 2010; Nelson 2013; Arlander et al. 2018) can respond to that broader demand through their capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and doing.

Although Marder's challenge is formulated as a series of questions, I do not read it as a suggestion that these issues have not been dealt with by artists before. Marder gives several examples of works focusing on vegetal growth in his text. And historically speaking there is no lack of artistic engagement with plants, from vegetally inspired ornamentation on textiles, pottery and architecture to paintings, poems and science fiction stories of plants. Living plants are used as material in practices as divergent as garden design, floral arrangements and contemporary bio art. The resonance with Marder's specific formulation, cited above, and with the works I will describe later, is linked, however, not only to the vegetal topic or material and the dependence on a specific site, but to the way of working, the manner of producing numerous variations rather than discardable drafts for one final outcome.

This text will unfold in three parts, in order to foreground the visual in one of the parts: First, a brief introduction to the background of my work and the context of Marder's text, then a visual account of the performances on site in Nida, and finally a discussion of the possible resonance with those works and the above quoted challenge.

## **PART ONE: Background and context**

### The project 'Performing with plants'

The works to be described are loosely linked to the artistic research project 'Performing with plants',<sup>1</sup> which can be understood as an attempt at responding to the challenge of engaging the vegetal by means of practical exploration. The main purpose of the project is to articulate and further develop experiences from previous projects focusing on landscape, by creating performances together with plants, especially trees. In the research proposal the aims of the project were summarized as follows:

'Performing with plants' is an artistic research project aiming to investigate the question 'how to perform landscape today?'. A post-humanist [sic] 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 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. (Arlander 2016)

The most important questions explored by the project are: 1) How to collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants (trees and shrubs)? 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 and join in? An overarching research problem is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the current posthumanist and new materialist understanding of the environment? Or perhaps we should write 'environment' (Alaimo 2010), since the idea of a separable environment is actually part of the problem to be addressed. To designate certain parts of existence to serve as environment to humans is no longer automatically acceptable.

Discussions concerning the notion landscape, and whether it is at all useful within contemporary art, have taken place within art theory (DeLue and Elkins 2008); scholars wonder if romanticising 'Nature' as 'Landscape' actually supports an untenable attitude to the environment. By creating images to be looked at from a distance, and from a human perspective, one might be indulging in a 'profound form of idealism' (Morton 2011, 80). For a truly ecological view, we should leave the idea of landscape and 'at least allow other entities, sentient or non-sentient, to talk to us' (Ibid.). Many artists are aware of this dilemma and try to move beyond visual representation of landscape or vegetation. Three examples involving coniferous trees, like the pines in *Nida*, which I will present later, can serve to exemplify various approaches: Agnes Denes' *Tree Mountain—A Living Time Capsule* (1996) in Ylöjärvi, Finland, with 11,000 planted pine trees, is an early example of a large-scale environmental rehabilitation project. Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video portrait of a single Spruce, *Horizontal* (2011), shows how our representational system is built to depict humans, and Marcus

Marder's sonification of biological processes in *Trees: Pinus Sylvestris* (Marder 2016) translates the suffering of a tree for human ears.

Rather than working with vegetal growth as material in the tradition of bio art or making biological processes understandable for humans with the help of technology, this project explores everyday forms of embodied action by performing for camera together with trees in the places where they grow. The project can be positioned at the intersection of performance art, media art (or video art, if we can speak of that today) and environmental art, in the encounter of traditions—performance art's emphasis on embodied presence, video and media art's valuing of repetition, transformation and critical reflection on technology and environmental art's sensitivity to the possible effects and side effects an artwork can have on the people and ecosystems involved.

The works I will discuss here, however, *Resting with Pines in Nida 1–12*, are only loosely related to this project, which began in Helsinki and continues in Stockholm. They differ from the main strategies used in the project, where focus is on repeated visits to the same trees and thus on temporality. In *Nida* variations of once-only encounters with several pine trees shift the focus to questions of compositional alternatives or changes in framing, distance and positioning of the human figure and their implication for our understanding of the human-tree relationship.

#### Plant thinking, plant theory, plant language

Marder's text can be placed within the growing interest in plant studies in recent years, an interest to which he himself has been substantially contributing. It is to some extent a further development of animal studies (Derrida 2002; Haraway 2008) and posthumanist thinking (Wolfe 2009; Braidotti 2013) and has focused on plant rights (Hall 2011), plant philosophy (Miller 2002; Marder 2013, Marder and Irigaray 2016), plant theory (Nealon 2016), the language of plants (Kranz, Schwan, Wittrock 2016; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira 2017) and more, such as queer plants (Sandilands 2017) or vegetal performativity (nicolić and Radulovic 2018). Discussions on plants and performance are mostly linked to ecology in broader terms, as in the journal issues *Performing Ethos* (Allen and Preece 2015) or *Performance Research: On Ecology* (Bottoms et al. 2012). There is no issue of *Performance Research* 'On Plants', or 'On Vegetation', so far, comparable to the two issues of *Antennae* (Aloi 2011a, 2011b) looking at plants and art. My own contributions focusing on performing with trees (Arlander 2010) or junipers (Arlander 2015b) have not found their way to these discussions. This is not the place for a proper survey of the field, nor am I the right person to undertake one. The brief notes in the following are meant to serve as a background to Marder's challenge and this specific discussion of resting with pines in *Nida*.

In *Plants as Persons, a Philosophical Botany* (2011), Matthew Hall analyses philosophical and religious writings from various traditions. He propagates an understanding of plants as 'active, self-directed, even intelligent Beings' and suggests that the 'recognition of plants as persons' emphasizes 'the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives' (Hall 2011, 169). Moreover, he notes how 'working closely with individual plant persons also has the potential to shift the view of nature as an organic, homogenized whole—which [...] contributes to the backgrounding of nature' (Ibid.).

In contrast to this idea of extending personhood to plants, Michael Marder challenges humans to learn from the dispersed life of plants and to recognize planthood in themselves. In his study *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), Marder offers a critique of the Western legacy of plant neglect by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics and stressing the importance of understanding vegetal life for understanding what it means to 'live with' other beings. For him 'the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with' (Marder 2013, 51). Moreover, 'the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an onto-political effect of plant-soul' which must 'eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority' (53). Marder tries to formulate a post-metaphysical way of thinking by focusing on 'the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought' (152). In his view, 'all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and [...] neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible' (51).

Thinking for Marder is not the sole privilege of the human subject. The vegetal *it thinks* refers to an undecided subject. *It thinks* is not concerned with 'who or what does the thinking?' but 'when and where does thinking happen?' Marder explains, because it arises from and returns to the plant's embeddedness in the environment. All radically contextual thought is an inheritor of vegetal life, he adds (169). This is fascinating with regard to site-specific artistic practices as well, especially when trying to explore performing together with plants on site.

An anthology, which brings into dialogue the different discourses of science, philosophy and literature, *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Gagliano, Ryan and Viveira, 2017), is a further example of an increasing interest in studying vegetal modes of being. Despite the seeming impossibility of understanding plants, 'we should continue trying to listen to what plants tell us in their own modes of expression' (Gagliano et al. 2017, xviii). From a critical theory perspective, Jeffrey Nealon suggests in *Plant Theory: Bio Power and Vegetable Life* (2016) that 'the question for politics in the biopower era is not really what we humans *should* do [...] but as Foucault suggests, [...] to pay closer attention to what our doing does' (Nealon 2016, 113).

Hall's idea of plants as persons is problematic and neither compatible with Marder's anti-metaphysics nor with a new materialist ontology, but nevertheless triggers the question of how to respect the integrity and specificity of individual trees as partners in performance. Here, 'individual' cannot be understood in the sense of indivisible, for most plants are exactly that, divisible, but rather in the sense of being unique as a result of the plants' responses over time to the specific circumstances where they grow, a sense of plant individuality emphasized by scientists as well (Trewavas 2011, 29).

Marder's ideas on vegetal democracy I have explored elsewhere (Arlander 2015 a). In this context his notion of vegetal thinking is a useful reminder that there are various forms of thinking taking place, also in the practice described, such as some kind of performance thinking (Nauha 2017), the thinking of the camera through its automatic functions, the thinking of the human being framing the image, as well as the vegetal thinking of the pines that serve as performing partners. Following Nealon, or Foucault, we can ask how to understand the effect on the trees, or at least minimize the

harm done to the trees while performing with them. And most importantly, what does this kind of doing do; what kind of human relationship with the trees in question do specific compositional choices willingly or unwillingly propagate.

### Transcorporeality and *zoe*

Some notions developed by new materialist feminist theorists are helpful in articulating what it might mean to perform with plants. The notions intra-action and agential cut developed by Karen Barad (2007) I have discussed elsewhere (Arlander 2014, 2018b) and will return to briefly, below. Other relevant notions for thinking and performing with plants are natureculture (Haraway 2003), sympoiesis (Haraway 2016), trans-corporeality (Alaimo 2010), and *zoe* (Braidotti 2013, 2017). The idea of *zoe* actually resembles Marder's idea of plants, animals and humans as 'growing beings' (Marder 2015, 187). Growth, breathing and the collaboration between Marder and Luce Irigaray I have explored in another text (Arlander, forthcoming). The notions trans-corporeality and *zoe* could perhaps help us understand the shared vitality and ongoing exchanges between the human being and the pines in the examples to be described.

Understanding 'human corporeality as trans-corporeality', a notion developed by Stacy Alaimo, 'in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world', stresses the fact that 'the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"' (Alaimo 2010, 2). Trans-corporeality 'reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures' (Ibid.), thus making the term helpful for understanding the exchanges between and amongst animals and vegetation, and thus also in this practice of performing with plants. There is an ongoing trans-corporeality between humans and trees, a chemical and physical exchange, despite the impossibility of verbal communication.

This exchange and communality between human animals and plants can also be articulated as a 'zoe-centred egalitarianism'. Rosi Braidotti posits *zoe* (rather than *bios*) as a ruling principle, as the 'dynamic, self-organizing structure of life' which 'stands for generative vitality', a 'transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories, and domains' (Braidotti 2017, 32). She proposes 'zoe-centered egalitarianism' as 'a materialist, secular, grounded, and unsentimental response to the opportunistic transspecies commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism' (Ibid.). In relationship to plants we could think of our common partaking in *zoe* as a generative vitality we share with vegetation.

### Performing and appearing

What does performing with plants mean in terms of performance? The act of performing for camera is relatively easy to understand as a performance; the camera takes the role of the witness or the audience: when the camera is on, the performance begins, and when it is off, the performance ends. This kind of limited understanding of performance excludes, however, other types of performances that emphasize action and process rather than the role of the witness. Following Karen Barad, for example, performances take place everywhere all the time. For her, 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). Thus, plants, too, are participating in this ongoing performance of the world. Therefore, there seems to be at least two kinds of performances in my example of performing with trees, the general performance going on in the world, including the plants, and the specific performance extracted out of it by the camera. The act of video recording means framing an image and cutting it out of the surroundings, and deciding a time continuum with beginning and end, for instance a period of time in the life of the tree. Each cut is the result of intra-actions of the apparatus in question, the environmental circumstances and various material-discursive practices, including compositional choices. And by these agential cuts (Barad 2007, 139) that designate what is spatially and temporally included in the video and what is excluded from mattering, a specific performance is extracted from the general performance that is going on in the world.

Can I really say that a tree is performing with me? Although understanding the relationship between performer and environment from a posthumanist and new-materialist perspective prompts us to consider how to perform together with life forms and phenomena around us, including plants, this might seem counter-intuitive at first. Elsewhere I have examined the implications of this 'performing with' (Arlander 2018a). When resting with a pine, performing together with a pine tree, posing for camera together, I am actually using the tree as my performing partner, without its consent, rather than trying to make myself understandable to the tree or to understand the tree's wishes or needs. How can I say that I am performing with a tree, that we are performing together? We are sharing the same image space, however, much as we were sharing the space on the same dunes. We are appearing or occurring together.

Probably not everybody would agree that plants perform, but there is no doubt that they appear. The interesting question is, can humans appear with them? In Finnish two words are used for performing, the transitive form '*esittää*', which is used when you perform something, and the intransitive '*esiintyä*', when you are performing yourself in the sense of appearing, of being on display. In Finnish, the word for 'appear' does not necessarily have the philosophical connotation of appearance as opposed to truth or reality, but is concerned with being visible, in the front ('*esillä*'). Both words for performing have a whole spectrum of other meanings, but their difference is perhaps clarified by a musician who exclaimed: 'Unfortunately, you cannot perform (*esittää*) music without performing (*esiintyä*)', meaning that you cannot play the music piece for an audience without being on display. Perhaps this distinction between the two modes of performing, 'the showing doing' and the 'showing oneself' or 'being shown'—appearing—can help us see how the pine trees perform.

The idea of occurring or appearing with plants actually resonates with the approach suggested by Marder elsewhere that 'plants articulate in their language devoid of words [...] [f]irst of all, themselves [...] they reaffirm vegetal being, which, through them, becomes more spatially pervasive' (Marder 2017, 120). According to him, 'plants articulate themselves with themselves' but they also 'articulate the burgeoning emergence, or self-generated appearance' thus 'demonstrating how a being can come into the light, appear, and signify itself' (122). If this is the case for plants,

why not for human beings as well? Could I not try to appear and signify myself together with the trees?

## PART TWO: Resting with Pines in Nida

In September 2017 during a residency at Nida Art Colony on the Curonian Spit in Lithuania, not far from the Russian border, I worked in the very particular landscape in that area, experimented with ways of performing with the pine trees covering the dunes, mainly by posing with them for a video camera on tripod, editing these experiments to small videos and describing my explorations in blog posts, which serve as material for the following account (with excerpts in footnotes). The video stills in the following try to demonstrate the crude visual thinking involved.

Nida is a town located on the Curonian Spit, a peninsula or 98 km-long, curved, sandy strip of land that separates the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea and forms [Neringa National Park](#). The northern part belongs to Lithuania and the rest to Russia, with Kaliningrad (formerly Königsberg) as the nearest city. Most of the spit is covered in pine forest. The Great Dune Ridge separating the Baltic Sea from the Curonian Lagoon was formed on moraine islands from sand transported by currents, and later covered by forest. Due to intensive logging in the 17th and 18th centuries the dunes began moving and burying the settlements. Dune stabilisation work was begun when it was obvious that human habitation would not be possible without direct action. A protective dune ridge was formed along the seashore and reinforced with pine trees and brushwood hedges to prevent the movement of the sand. Today forests and sands dominate the landscape on the Curonian Spit, with only eight small settlements (Unesco website). As a result of 'this unique union of man and nature in shaping the landscape', the area was proclaimed a national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site (Lithuanian travel website). In other words, 'even the spit's most deceptively natural areas are really monuments to human striving' (Morton 2006).

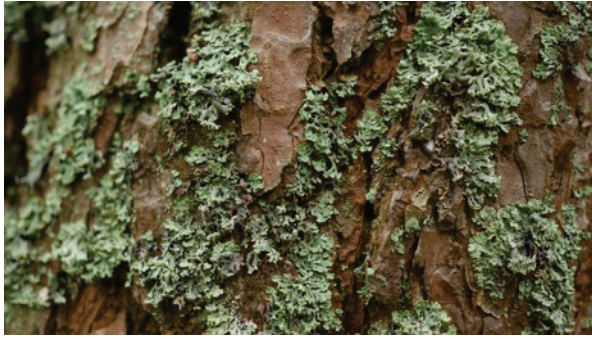
There is a tradition of artists celebrating the landscape in Nida. From the late-19th century, the dune landscape around Nidden, as it was called at the time, was popular among landscape painters from the *Kunstakademie Königsberg*, who formed the expressionist artists' colony, *Künstlerkolonie Nidden*. The writer Thomas Mann had a summer house built on a hill above the Lagoon, and spent the summers of 1930–32 there with his family (Nida/Nidden website). Nida Art Colony (NAC), which opened in 2011, is part of Vilnius Academy of Arts (Nida website), and located at the outskirts of the thriving tourist village.<sup>2</sup>





*Figure 1. Snapshot of the forest*

The pine forest covering the area around Nida is lovely to walk in, although not really conducive for performing; most of the trees are slender and straight, with no branches to sit on (see Figure 1). My initial impulse was to keep walking.<sup>3</sup> Later I combined walks recorded with an action camera into the video *Walking in Nida* (22 min. 22 sec.), an experiment in performing landscape rather than performing with plants. I also tried to create compositions with images of the tree trunks, made close-ups of the pines' bark and explored other possibilities, trying this and that, but never made any edited works of these various try-outs (See Figures 2 and 3). This way of spreading out in all directions, exploring different dimensions of the environment, experimenting with various techniques and tools in parallel, testing several working methods rather than developing one of them, reaching out for alternative approaches (movement or immobility, wide framing or close-ups, focusing on the forest or the paths or other vegetation and so on) indeed resembled 'to strive like a plant in all directions at once, excessively' (Marder 2015, 193) albeit unlike the plants, in this case mostly in vain.

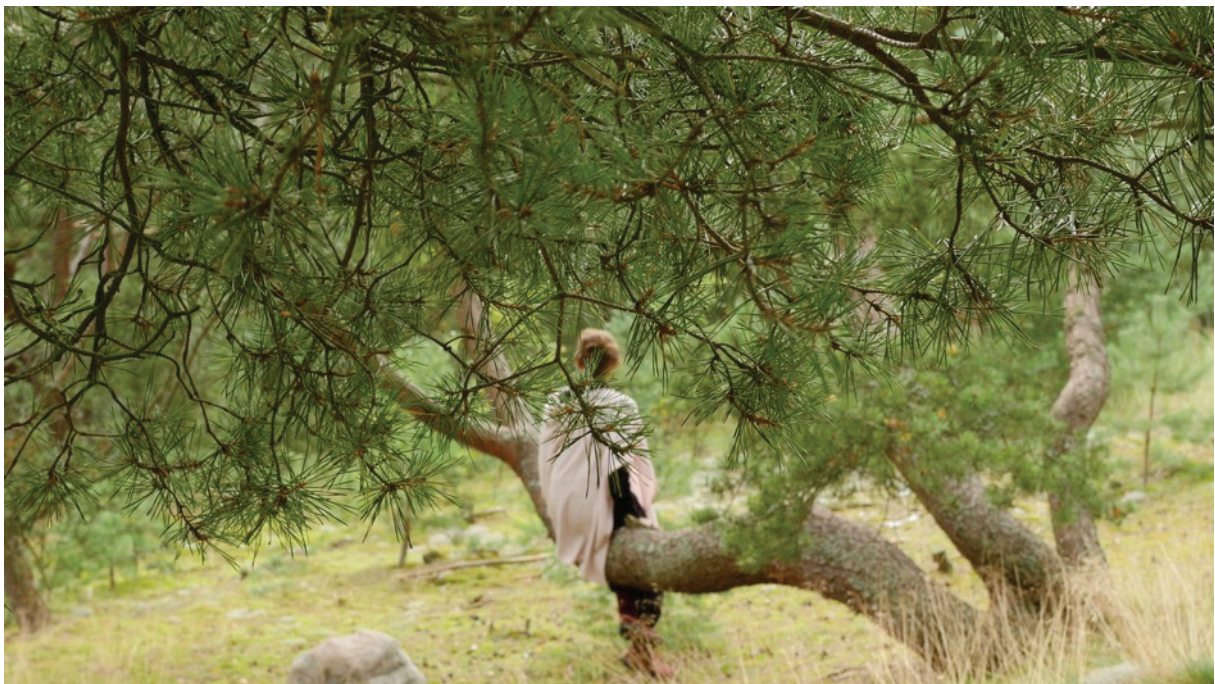


*Figure 2. Video still of unedited material*



*Figure 3. Video still of unedited material*

The first individual tree to pose with I found to the north of the colony.<sup>4</sup> The two performances for camera with that pine tree were recorded on Saturday afternoon 9 September 2017 and edited into *Resting with a Pine 1* (12 min. 58 sec.) and *Resting with a Pine 2* (12 min. 2 sec.). Two completely different images (see Figures 4 and 5) were produced of two almost identical performances with the same tree, by changing the position of the camera.



*Figure 4. Resting with a Pine 1 video still*

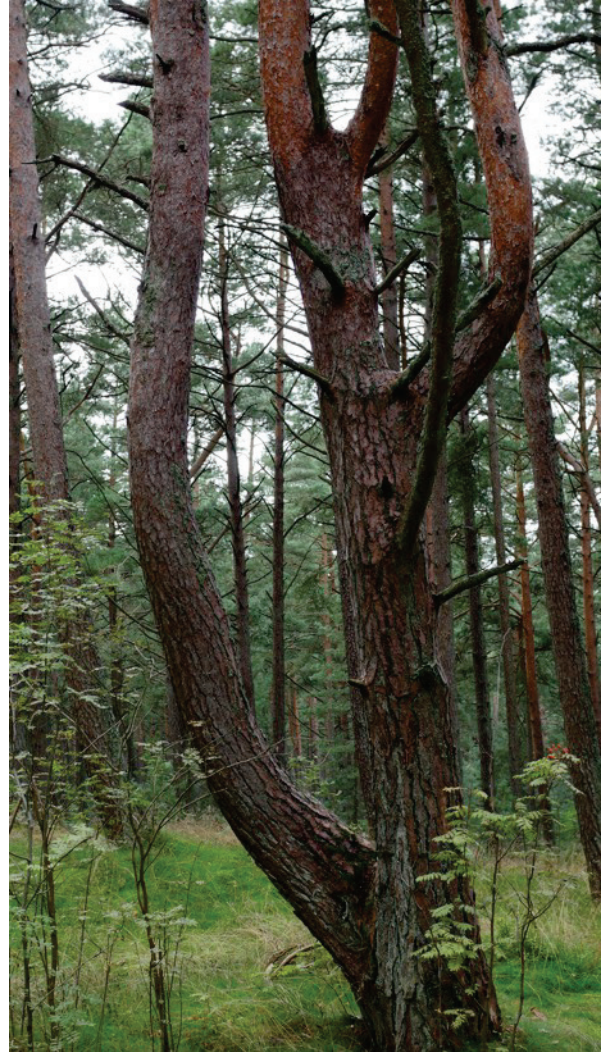


*Figure 5. Resting with a Pine 2 video still*

A few days later I made a new attempt, when encountering a pine with a trunk bifurcated near the ground.<sup>5</sup> This third performance was recorded on Tuesday 12 September 2017 and edited into *Resting with a Pine 3* (6 min.). The following images demonstrate the problem of working with horizontal video images of trees, which are decidedly vertical (see Figures 6 and 7), as well as the ethical implications of compositional strategies. Maintaining the human scale and the 9:6 landscape format completely disregards the specificity of the vertical tree partner.



*Figure 6. Resting with a Pine 3 video still*



*Figure 7. Snapshot of the pine*

More pines to pose with I found closer to the sea side of the spit, near the 52-meter-high Parnidis sand dune. The pine trees on the dunes grow in a different manner from the ones in the forest, individually, with some distance between them, and with their branches spread out on the sand, as if keeping it in place, and are easier to capture in landscape format (see Figure 8).<sup>6</sup> Three performances with three different pines were made on 13 September 2017 and edited into *Resting with a Pine 4* (9 min. 16 sec.), *Resting with a Pine 5* (8 min. 10 sec.) and *Resting with a Pine 6* (6 min. 58 sec.).



*Figure 8. Resting with a Pine 4 video still*

Especially in the two last ones (see Figures 9 and 10), the human figure is fairly large and dominating and the pine seems more like a supporting prop. Dissatisfied, I abandoned these experiments for a while.



*Figure 9. Resting with a Pine 5 video still*



*Figure 10. Resting with a Pine 6 video still*

When my time in Nida was drawing to a close I decided to try my habitual way of working, at least once, and to find a tree to visit repeatedly to make a time-lapse video. I chose a tree high on the dunes and made two performances, sitting higher or lower in the same tree, on 23 September, in preparation for the time-lapse work the following day.<sup>7</sup> They were edited into *Resting with a Pine 7* (8 min. 12 sec.) and *Resting with a Pine 8* (8 min. 12 sec.) to be of equal duration, possibly to be shown together (see Figures 11 and 12).



*Figure 11. Resting with a Pine 7 video still*



*Figure 12. Resting with a Pine 8 video still*

On Sunday 24 September I recorded a series of performances with the pine tree every two hours between 8 am and 8 pm and edited these recordings into the video *Sunday with a Pine* (8 min.12 sec.). Later, the blog notes I wrote after each visit were recorded and added as a voice-over to the video, resulting in *Sunday with a Pine - with text*. This narrative version was made only after reading the text as an accompaniment to a screening of the video in Helsinki (27 October 2017) where the mundane text served as a contrast to the romantic imagery (see Figures 13 and 14).



*Figure 13. Sunday with a Pine video still (8 am)*



Figure 14. *Sunday with a Pine* video still (8 pm)

At the Open Studios event in Nida the following Monday, however, *Sunday with a Pine* was presented without text and inspired some mild collegial critique. I realized my previous attempts were less problematic, but also less interesting, because they did not flirt with the tradition of the 'sublime'.<sup>8</sup> The thought of my vanity influencing the images was irritating, so I decided to make a few more attempts, with various distances to the camera, either too close or too far in order not to emphasize the human figure.<sup>9</sup> The four performances recorded with one pine tree on 26 September were edited into *Resting with a Pine 9* (5 min. 26 sec.), *Resting with a Pine 10* (7 min. 10 sec.), *Resting with a Pine 11* (7 min. 10 sec.) and *Resting with a Pine 12* (6 min. 15 sec.). They exemplify a form of visual thinking, of searching for ways to make the relationship between the human and the pine more equal, by showing only a fragment of both (see Figures 15 and 16), either almost in silhouette or by focusing on the 'skin' of the pine with the presence of the human only hinted at by the scarf.



Figure 15. *Resting with a Pine 9* video still



Figure 16. *Resting with a Pine 10* video still

Another strategy was to increase the distance, adapting to the scale of the tree, in order to show it in full (see Figure 17) or to place the camera at mid-distance, where the human is still discernible (see Figure 18).



*Figure 17. Resting with a Pine 11 video still*



*Figure 18. Resting with a Pine 12 video still*

To experiment with the possibility of contrasting the view of the tree and the view from the tree, the tree's view as it were, I held an action camera while sitting in the tree recording the view simultaneously with the video camera on tripod recording the main image.<sup>10</sup> Thus, four videos of the view from the pine were recorded, *View from a Pine 1* (5 min. 26 sec.), *View from a Pine 2* (6 min. 43 sec.), *View from a Pine 3* (6 min. 43 sec.) and *View from a Pine 4* (6 min. 15 sec.), which all look rather similar (see Figure 19).



*Figure 19. View from a Pine 1 video still*



The only video that I have developed further of all these experiments, so far, is *Sunday with a Pine*. Combining the various attempts together would probably be the best way of exhibiting them—a demonstration of the process, or, of the difficulties of posing with the pines, or of performing with trees more generally.

In contrast to my usual way of working—repeated visits to the same site edited to form rough time-lapse videos showing changes in the landscape—these once-only-performances produced something between a still-image and moving image. This is further accentuated by showing them here as stills, without duration or performative dimension. Some of the images convey a distinct atmosphere, while others seem like thoughtless variations, as if I did not spend enough time behind the camera choosing the composition, and preferred the experience of sitting in the tree. But, however magic the moment of sitting in the tree, what remains is the recording. There is a tension between experience and the record of it, between an event and its documentation. These performances were nevertheless deliberately made for and by the camera, intended for future viewers.

The emphasis on work-in-progress or flow rather than a timeless object or work, is discussed for instance by Boris Groys (2013). 'Documentation of the act of working on an artwork is already an artwork,' he writes. Moreover, 'If the public follows my activity all the time, then I do not need to present it with any product. The process is already the product', he adds. 'If art has become a flow, it flows in a mode of self-documentation. Here action is simultaneous with its documentation, its inscription. And the inscription simultaneously becomes information that is spread through the internet and instantly accessible by everybody' (Groys 2013, n.p.).

One of the reasons I began creating rough time-lapse videos documenting changes in a landscape was to avoid the idea of representation, the one image that would somehow stand in for the landscape. Experience of landscapes showed me that everything was in a constant flux, changing from one moment to the next. By returning to the same site and by keeping the framing constant, I could avoid the lure of adjusting the image to include the beautiful sunset or the dramatic shadow and so on.

I tried to translate this same idea of repetition to my once-only-performances and poses with pine trees in Nida, by choosing one more tree and then one more... They were all beautiful and valuable and extraordinary—or did I simply reach out again and again, waiting for a surprise, an unforeseen event? The focus on experimentation, on generating variations, instead of polishing a final work, is a common strategy in contemporary art, where process is increasingly stressed over product. And it is this focus, this excess of variations, that takes us back to the challenge we began with.

### PART THREE: Discussion

In what way do these experiments respond to the challenge to artists posed by Michael Marder that we began with? The suggestion to 'plug their work into the process of growth, broadly understood as a striving', is linked to trying out various approaches and creating variations. 'What would it mean for a performance, or for another artistic practice, to strive like a plant in all directions at once, excessively [...]?' What is excessive for one artist is ordinary for another; in this case looking for new tree partners, creating new versions with the same partner, trying with another camera and so on, is excessive compared to my previous modes of working. And to do it 'with the utmost spatial or corporeal attention paid to every inch of the place where it unfolds?' These works were conditioned by the site, the specific characteristics of the landscape and the vegetation, and tried to utilize their potential, but attention could always be more detailed. 'Where is the border between concentration and scattering here?' This question seems to be crucial in much artistic practice; to focus on one thing and develop that, or to experiment and produce variations in an almost vegetal manner; one more leaf (or needle) and then one more, and more...

The question '[w]hat would need to be set up for this kind of performance to grow, to extend its reach, while remaining rooted in the context wherein it first cropped up?' is more specific in its address of the context or site. To work with plants in the place where they grow, as in this case, to respect the specific spatiality of plants, poses problems related to the tension between representation and performativity. How much of the specificity of a tree and its site can be maintained in digital video works.

Perhaps the most inspiring of the questions, regardless of the perplexing reference to the Baroque, is the following: 'What would its modular self-complication or self-replication in this place, which I have provocatively analogized to the Baroque, entail?' In some sense the production of variations, of alternative poses or portraits with and of the same or alternative pine trees, from the same or an alternative camera angle, could be understood as a form of self-complication and self-replication. It is further accentuated by the fact that the same person acts as the artist behind the camera and the performer in front of the camera. And lastly, Marder's surprising remark regarding such a practice, asking 'how, if at all, would it engage with the plants themselves?' Here Marder opens the possibility to look at the mode of working rather than the subject, topic or material of the work as attuned with or emulating the vegetal. Although my examples are focusing on plants as subject matter, or rather on specific pine trees growing in a specific area, the idea of an artistic practice that resembles vegetal growth, a vegetal sensibility, is the most enticing.

The difficult balancing between scattering and concentration, between outreach and rootedness as well as of modular self-complication or self-replication is evident only with hindsight. Instead of concentrating on working with one image until it is perfect, or worthy of display, my choice was making more images, encountering more trees, creating an abundance of alternatives. In another sense this focus on dispersed vegetal being, or on the flow of matter is also in line with new materialist and posthumanist thought, where the value of forms of *zoe* or types of critters partaking in mutual trans-corporeality cannot be self-evidently divided into hierarchies of good and bad, right

and wrong, successful and superfluous, although such exclusions and inclusions are constantly taking place in practice.

Perhaps an approach of variations and excess, a vegetal impulse of sorts, simply exemplifies a tendency common among artist researchers to go on experimenting for the joy of it, sometimes after the aim of the project, the possible insight sought for has been reached. This is a characteristic common to many performance practices as well, the wish to go on far beyond what is needed in order to make a point or to gain the knowledge sought, a wish to go on singing, to 'keep growing'.

But what about resting? The title of the variations described and of this text is 'Resting with Pines', not growing with pines. Resting is another dimension of vegetal being that we could attune to and learn from. Although the silence or slowness of trees is largely an illusion and due to the limitations of the human sensorium, trying to stay for a while with such sessile beings as pine trees in the place where they live, to perform, appear or pose with them for a moment, will inevitably help us in resting, too.

In the beginning I asked whether it would be possible to respond to the challenge of a philosopher with artistic means, and whether such a response could be communicated in a journal? Is it possible to demonstrate the thinking that takes place in performances for camera with visual means without turning the demonstration into critical studies or an artist talk? Based on the experiences in writing this text I would say that it might perhaps be possible, even though this text has here resorted to many more words than images.

## Appendix

*Sunday with a Pine:* <https://vimeo.com/287796798>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Att uppträda / samarbeta med växter – Performing with plants, an artistic research project funded by the Swedish Research Council at Stockholm University of the Arts Research Centre (2018-2019). See <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>

<sup>2</sup> 'I can imagine this as a real tourist paradise in summer months. /--/ Nida really looks like a place with more than hundred years of experience in tourism – picturesque, clean, cosy and peaceful but a little lively too, in the right corners.' (bp 4.9.2017)

<sup>3</sup> 'After a few days of walking back and forth on the sandy forest paths on the pine-covered dunes of Nida I have realized that in contrast to the usual proverb, I cannot see the trees for the forest. /--/ Something in the environment suggest moving on the paths rather than sitting in one place, so I played with my little Gopro action camera and tried to see what could be done with it. (bp 8.9.2017)

Exploring movement has been my main challenge during this week in Nida... /--/The problem of the moving

camera, the moving image, literally, is not solved by these experiments, though.' (bp 10.9. 2017)

<sup>4</sup> 'The forest is full of pine trees, all fairly straight and tall, or then small mountain pines that form impenetrable thickets. Finding a suitable partner is not an easy matter, so I decided to return to the pine with the branches bending low that I saw yesterday and to try to make a session with it. In the afternoon I changed to my black 'performance outfit', took my camera, tripod and scarf, and set out to find the pine. /--/ In the end I found two ways of framing the image that were somehow interesting. The first one with the pine branches in close up covering the whole upper part of the image and the second one with the sculptural shape of the branches crossing each other. I sat for approximately ten minutes for each image and was rather lucky in having that part of the forest for myself for a while. /--/ These small videos I called "Resting with a Pine" and that is exactly what they are about.' (bp 8.9.2017)

<sup>5</sup> 'After a rather long walk on the forest paths north of the colony I suddenly saw a pine tree by the path which looked inviting, because it was divided in two fairly close to the ground. It turned out to be somewhat of an illusion, though, and not so easy to climb up to. But I finally managed to straddle it, like a horse, and sit there leaning against the wet trunk for a while. /--/ The image looks fairly comfortable, but it is so very misleading with regard to the tree. The beautiful form of the trunk needs a vertical image to come to the fore.' (bp 13.9.2017)

<sup>6</sup> 'Yesterday I returned to the dunes where I saw the first pines with strong and spread out branches suitable to sit on, and found more than enough of possible partners. The pines look special because they grow individually and not in thickets as further up on the spit and they spread out their lowest branches on top of the sand, as if to keep it there, under their skirt hem as it were. I tried to find ones that would let some of the view to be seen through their needles, and to have the light in a nice angle. The first one is taken with the camera on the slope so it looks like I would be sitting very low. The two others are taken with the camera below, but a little bit too close. The human figure is again fairly large compared to the tree.' (bp 13.9.2017)

<sup>7</sup> '[T]oday, when the weather suddenly cleared and a beautiful sunshine made everything look interesting again, I realized I should perhaps try to make one rough time-lapse session with a pine tree and my ordinary equipment after all. /--/ I found a potential pine partner near the beach, but perhaps too far to return to every second hour, so I walked up to the parking lot near the dunes and chose a pine tree with low and relatively bare branches. Most of the pines on the dunes are spreading their branches to create impenetrable green mounds, but this one ... seemed easy and inviting. So, I made a brief session as a try out, sitting up in the tree and on the branch almost touching the ground. ... I managed to find a place for the camera on the slope that enabled a framing with the horizon approximately in the middle of the image, and I tried to mark the place by sticks in the sand. Leaving the tripod there for the whole day is probably not a good idea, because it is quite close to the parking place and there are lots of visitors on the weekend. Concerning the schedule starting and finishing at eight could be ok, the sun rises something like half past seven and sets around half past seven in the evening, but there is probably enough light at eight to end with a fadeout...' (bp 23.9.2017)

<sup>8</sup> 'Prompted by the comments I received I realised that I very easily succumb to a form of vanity, creating romantic imagery where the human figure looks good and the atmosphere is somehow semi-sublime. This was particularly true for the work I showed, Sunday with a Pine, which is recorded from a middle distance. My previous attempts, especially Resting with a Pine 4, 5 and 6 are much less flattering for the performer, but also less pleasing as views, and perhaps less interesting, too, because they do not "flirt" with the problematic tradition of the "sublime" landscape. I was nevertheless irritated by the idea of letting my vanity influence the images, and decided to make one more attempt.' (pp 27.9.2017)

<sup>9</sup> 'On Tuesday afternoon I climbed up to the dunes and looked for a suitable pine that would stand relatively alone, so I could have an image of it from a distance without other branches hindering the view. And of course, I wanted to find one I could easily climb on and not be completely covered by the needles. I chose one near the open dunes and tried to find the right angle for the camera with regard to the sun. I had also brought with me my go pro, and wanted to experiment with recording the view from where I sat in the tree with that camera while my main camera on the tripod would record the whole scene. I made four attempts with the tripod placed at various distances. The two first ones are in close up ... with only my shoulder visible in the image. The first one is actually too dark, almost

in backlight, but there you can see something of the landscape below. The third one is about as far as I could get without bumping into another tree and shows the pine in full. The fourth image is something of a compromise, from a distance, but closer, so you can see the human figure more clearly. It is perhaps closer to a romantic version again.' (bp 27.9.2017)

<sup>10</sup> 'The go pro images from the four variations look almost the same: I had the camera in my hand while sitting in the pine, and although I tried to stay immobile there is small movement all the time. They are ok as still images, even though the horizon is leaning one way or the other and you cannot see so much of the view in them either.' (bp 27.9.2017)

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*Resting with a Pine* 1–6: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=387855>

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*Resting with a Pine* 9–12: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=393160>

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