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This manuscript contains the fourth letter (Dear Spruce, dear deceased...) which is accidentally omitted from the printed text.

Writing To Trees With The Trees: Experiments in NIROX and Mustarinda

Annette Arlander

For a long time he believed he was still walking through the forest, in the warm numbing wind that seemed to blow from all sides, stirring the trees like snakes. Through the unchanging twilight he followed the barely visible track of blood on the swaying ground – alone into the battle with the beast.¹

The first thoughts regarding *Forests and Fences* reached me at the Mustarinda artists' residency in Kainuu, near the Paljakka old-growth forest nature reserve. The reserve is marked by a painted "fence"; the area that is strictly forbidden for humans to enter is marked all around the forest, simply by white paint on the tree trunks. It is rather similar to the way paths for walking and skiing are marked by coloured paint on tree trunks, although they tend to be more like slashes of paint. Trees used to be marked for felling with such painted signs. Nowadays I hear they mark the trees that are supposed to be saved, that is, left standing, rather than the ones that are to be felled. I was fascinated by this idea of a purely symbolic fence that still somehow seems to work, and immediately thought that if I could have one illustration to the text, which I was to write about my experiments near the private nature reserve in the vicinity of NIROX Sculpture Park and near the strict nature reserve in Paljakka, it would be one of the painted tree trunks, perhaps simply because it is somehow beautiful as well.

This text deals with forests and fences in a very literal sense, taking as its starting point two experiments related to the problem of how to perform with trees in two residencies on opposite sides of the planet. The first one was an ARA (Arts Research Africa) residency in Johannesburg during

February to March 2020², including a short stay in NIROX, Krugersdorp; the second one was a residency in Mustarinda near Hyrnsalmi, Kainuu, in northeastern Finland in September 2020³. In this text, I focus on attempts at performing with trees by writing letters to them in both of these locations, as part of the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.⁴ My efforts at describing these specific contexts inevitably touch on ideas like wilderness, wildness, and rewilding as well as fences, restrictions, and no-go zones, terrains that can be understood in very different and relatively similar ways in both these locations.

As a reminder of the many ways to understand the idea of the forest, I insert some quotes, like the one at the beginning of this text, as vignettes or intermissions between the sections of the text. They are extracts from a play written by Heiner Müller in 1972⁵, which I used in a theatre performance and radio play in 1989. The fragments serve as examples of the many metaphors about forests, of a more “dramatic” approach to forests and performance as well as the impossibility of separating ourselves and the forest. The extracts evoke the struggles in the world outside the privileged nature reserves that I was working in, forming a backdrop to my performances. Other backdrops, waiting off stage, include wildness as something untouched or unregulated by humans – a no-go zone, a pirate zone, or a “Sherwood forest” where the laws of the city do not count. Another is “korpi” or “erämaa”, wilderness in Finnish, a vast hunting ground or a deep forest to get lost in, which has very different connotations to the Anglo-Saxon myth of pristine wilderness. And there are fences. They can be both symbolic and literal, painted fences or fences of barbed wire, fences to protect and restrict, to exclude and include, fences that are needed, and fences those are unnecessary. There is also the idea of rewilding as an ecological maintenance term; letting go of control, or helping ecosystems to recover. And what about the feral, the darker side of rewilding; encountering the brutes again? Despite these backdrops, these multidirectional reverberations generated by forests and fences, my main concern here is nevertheless a few examples of performing with trees.

Humans are performing with trees all the time, breathing together and exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide, among other things. The great northern forests as well as the tropical rainforests produce a large part of the oxygen in the biosphere⁶, although the algae in the oceans probably produce even more.⁷ Plants, or rather cyanobacteria, began the creation of our current biosphere, a world liveable for humans.⁸ When I speak of performing with trees, I do not mean it in this broader sense of processual action; rather, I speak of performance in a limited sense in terms of performing for the camera or appearing together in front of the camera with trees in a manner that can be shared as video works with other humans. In principle, these video works could be shared with the trees as well, since most plants can discern light in a much greater register than humans. Performing with trees is not

an easy venture – their mode of being is seemingly very different from that of humans, although humans, too, are growing beings⁹. The simple fact of size and scale makes performing together for the camera difficult, although we could say that plants are the true artists of being, constantly creating their bodies, they are “performative creatures par excellence, the artists of themselves.”¹⁰

In discussing the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, we inevitably encounter the questions: What is remarkable? What is unremarkable? For whom is it remarkable or unremarkable? The idea of meetings with trees could be considered controversial or even misguided, because we should learn to think in terms of systems, of forests, rather than individual trees, and more specifically to understand how forests think¹¹ rather than whether the trees are watching us.¹² In considering such other than Western European or Aristotelian modes of regarding vegetation, we could look at the combination of botany with indigenous thinking by Robin Wall Kimmerer,¹³ or build on the work by philosophers examining our neglect of plants, like Michael Marder¹⁴ and Emanuele Coccia¹⁵.

In this project I have leaned on the efforts of decolonizing relationships to nature by ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who pointed out that colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between “us” and “them”, and to see “them” as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualized. To counter this tendency, attending to particular trees might work as a way to help us see trees as life forms that we have much in common, despite our undeniable differences.¹⁶

Like the hero Herakles, who does not recognize the forest he is walking through to his encounter with the monster Hydra, we do not always recognize the trees that surround us as the living beings they actually are:

Could this forest, which resembled none of the forests he had known or had “walked through”, still be called a forest at all. Perhaps he had been underway too long, an earth-time too long, and now forests were only what this forest was. Perhaps only the nomination made it a forest and all other features had long since become incidental, interchangeable.¹⁷

The Wilds in Johannesburg

The Wilds is a park in the wealthy northern part of Johannesburg divided in two by a motorway; the two parts are connected by a bridge, the eastern side being less frequented and “wilder”. The park is protected from the rest of the city with high fences, although openly accessible through the main gate. It is distinct among the parks in the “great man-made forest” of Johannesburg due to the fact that it is an arboretum of indigenous (not necessarily local, though) rather than exotic or imported trees,¹⁸ which dominate the streets

and other parks. It was created in the 1930s on land donated by a mining finance house on condition that it would be kept open to the public, at the same time as the first formally planned African township Orlando, what later was to be called Soweto, took shape at the other end of the city¹⁹. These two pre-apartheid projects “functioned as antinomies of regional nature and urban culture, preserving past nature and advancing a cosmopolitan future modernity”²⁰ “The contemporaneous creation of The Wilds and Orlando” shows according to architectural historian Jeremy Foster the “power of representation that remains at the heart of the modernist project” and is “an important basis for its alliance with capital” as well as “the hidden agency of nature in facilitating economic accumulation”.²¹

I visited *The Wilds* twice during my stay as a guest at Wits University from February to March 2020 but performed there only during my first visit. On the western side, I sat on the branch of a river bushwillow (*Combretum erythrophyllum*)²² and on the eastern side, I stood leaning on a Henkel’s Yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*)²³. The first session was visually more spectacular, although surprisingly uncomfortable, and therefore briefer than 21 min, the maximum possible with the camera I used. The second session was less visually interesting and less challenging to perform, as I could only stand next to the tree, enjoying its shade. I have described the context in which the early performances of *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* took place and discussed the strategies for performing with trees that I experimented with, as well as the trees I performed with in Johannesburg in another text.²⁴ In this text I will focus on addressing trees in writing.

The forest trails by Mustarinda

Mustarinda house is situated next to the Paljakka strict nature reserve on Paljakkavaara mountain, in northeastern Finland. National parks are nature conservation areas owned by the state that are open to everyone²⁵, whereas strict nature reserves are reserved for scientific purposes and more severely protected than national parks.²⁶ Paljakka strict nature reserve, near the Mustarinda artists community, is nevertheless possible to access through a specific trail. The borders of the area are marked with signs near the roads and in the forest itself with white painted lines on the tree trunks. During my residency, we took a walk in the nature reserve, which had to be accessed from the other side of the area; I did not perform there, though. The old-growth forest near Mustarinda and the walking trails there were adjacent to the nature reserve, and without the painted marks one would not have noticed any difference. The forest consists mainly of old spruces (some birches, rowans, aspen, and goat willows between them), and what makes it so special is the fact that the old trees are left to rot on the ground, which is unusual in most of the forests in Finland, as they are more like

plantations, with trees of the same age in rows. The trees I chose to perform within the Mustarinda forest were possible to somehow frame visually as standing out from the rest of the forest or were remarkable in some manner. The challenge of performing with trees in Mustarinda and in other forests was that the old spruces were tall and straight and simply beyond the human scale and hard to fit into a video image. Some of the trees I performed with on the forest trail were *The Reclining Birch* (September 8, 2020), *Rowan on Crutches* (September 11, 2020), *Listening with an Aspen* (September 20 and September 22, 2020), and *With a Goat Willow* (September 21, 2020).²⁷ With the huge old aspen tree in *Listening with an Aspen*, I turned my camera to make a vertical image. While this is not a problem with photography, it poses a real challenge in terms of editing and displaying a video work. I also performed, on several occasions, with a small birch in the nearby bog, resulting in the following video works: *With the Bog Birch* (September 14, 2020), *Day with a Bog Birch* (September 23, 2020), and *Standing with a Bog Birch* (September 25, 2020). The most relevant trees in this context are the ones I tried to write letters to at the end of my time in Mustarinda and in Johannesburg; they assist in foregrounding the problem of addressing trees.

Unlike the hero, who finally recognizes that the forest he is walking through is the monster he is supposed to meet, I, like many others, have not fully recognized that we live in, on, of, and thanks to the forest that contains us.

the forest was the beast. The forest which he believed he was walking through had been the beast for a long time. It carried him at the speed of his own steps, the ground waves were its gasps and the wind was its breath. The track he had followed was his own blood which the forest (the beast) had sampled.²⁸

Letters to trees in NIROX

Writing letters to trees is something I tried for the first time with an ancient olive tree in Catalonia, Spain already in December 2019, and have since explored in many contexts.²⁹ I returned to the practice at the end of my stay in Johannesburg. There I also made my first experiments of recording the letters and adding them as voice-overs to the videos of the performances with the trees. In NIROX Sculpture Park³⁰, in Krugersdorp, quite a distance from Johannesburg but nevertheless in Gauteng, I wrote to and with two small shrubs that belonged to the species Firethorn Rhus (*Rhus pyroides*).³¹ The first one grew inside the park; the second one out in the bushveld, what seemed to be part of the private Kkhalhamping nature reserve behind the park. The choice of this shrub was due to the fact that I had performed for a day with a sculptural couple of the same species³² in the park and was

glad to recognize it, although I did not know it was an indigenous shrub at that moment. The letters that were written as part of the performances for the camera on March 18 and 19, 2020 were read, recorded, and added to the videos as voice-overs on the same nights. In the following section, I will focus on these letters, which will serve as examples of attempts at addressing trees as a way of performing with them. They do describe the surroundings inside and outside the rather invisible fences of the park as well.

Dear Searsia,

or Rhus, or Firethorn Rhus or Common Wild Currant, or however you prefer to be called. I am pleased to meet you here in NIROX Sculpture Park, and sincerely hope that you don't mind my sitting on you, here by the brook. You look fresh and strong after the storm last night and your trunk or branch is wet and heavy with water. I guess you have always plenty of water, living next to the brook, but nothing beats a good shower! Now the sun is hiding between the clouds again, and there are sudden gusts of wind, which feel almost like there could be another rain (shower) coming. – I feel funny beginning with the weather, as if you were a British shrub. But, how else could I approach you now, when I already have entered your intimate sphere, like a brutal intruder. I do hope you are accustomed to humans who feel invited by your low-bending trunk to take a rest here. After all, you are growing right on the path to the small bridge across the real river. But, the tiny waterfall next to you is decorative, isn't it? Probably you like the sound as well. Scientists have discovered that some plants can direct their roots to grow towards water based on the sound only, even when no humidity is present as an indicator of water. Here, in your home there sure is water everywhere – in these brooks with their murmuring sound, and in the vast ponds that function as mirrors for the trees and the artworks and the sky. How does it feel to live in such luxurious circumstances? To be sat on and passed by hundreds of visitors, mainly on weekends when the park is open for the public, is not a hard price to pay for this abundance, I suppose. But, if indeed you are a Firethorn Rhus you are either male or female, male, I suppose, because I cannot see any berries, so, it must be a little lonely here on the lawn. Or, then I am being a stupid human again; you communicate via the bees, of course. Right now, it is the end of season, end of summer, so I can see no flowers, no bees and no frantic activity around you – merely some moths that make some of your leaves look rather sick (hopefully they were reduced by the rain last night). This time of year, I would expect some berries, however, but if you are a male, then that is not your problem. – Sitting here, trying to write, I become aware of the dampness of your bark; the water slowly seeps into clothes. Luckily it is rather warm, still. – I wonder what I should tell you,

what would be interesting from your perspective, besides the weather? The current pandemic-panic that spreads around the globe doesn't concern you. And here the polyphagous spot hole borers (or whatever they are called) that plague the old trees on the streets in Johannesburg and are spreading a fungus that kills the old and beautiful plane trees has probably not reached here yet. And perhaps it would not concern you, anyway. We all have our own diseases, parasites and pests, I suppose. But something is bothering you, that is clear, because most of your leaves have dark brown spots and some leaves look clearly "eaten", with only the "veins" or the net of fibrous structure remaining, and all the chlorophyll-rich material eaten away. They say that most plants can survive to be eaten up to 70% and can happily grow new leaves instead of the ones consumed by animals, but that will be next year, I guess. I suppose you let your leaves fall and grow new ones in the spring, but I do not know for sure. Most evergreens have either needles or then glossy, hard leaves. Well, no, I am forgetting the tropics. The various plant species and their mode of living are so numerous or innumerable, that it is simply hilarious to even imagine understanding anything about all their diverse strategies. Thank you for your patience with me, and many thanks for letting me sit here. All the best for the future, too. I hope you will get well soon!

The first letter was written while sitting on a shrub bending over a small brook, with my back to the camera, almost as a silhouette, and the sound of the tiny waterfall dominating the video.³³ In the video, the act of writing is barely visible. The letter was written as a kind of automatic writing, freely associating in the moment, without pausing to reflect on what to write, or how to do it. The text is transcribed from the handwritten notes without editing or modifications, in order to retain the character of a trace or documentation of the performance. Happy with the result of the first experiment inside the sculpture park, I tried writing another letter with another Firethorn Rhus the following day. While the first letter above was addressed to a shrub growing inside the park, the second one was addressed to a shrub of the same species growing by the road far up on the grassland in the nature reserve. For the second video³⁴, titled *Dear Firethorn Rhus II*, I am not wearing my usual black costume, but a sand-coloured T-shirt to go with the surroundings. The letter is influenced by the rumours of the prevailing pandemic and discusses a possible transmission of plant viruses from the shrub inside the park to this relative in the field.

Dear Firethorn Rhus (II),

I have been spending time with two of your kin in the NIROX Sculpture Park, and only today did I realize that you are actually growing all over the place in the surrounding bushveld, which is part of the Nature

Reserve, I think. Many of you are much bigger than you, my dear friend, if I dare say so after such a brief acquaintance. And I just took and broke one of your dry branches, not a very nice gesture to start a conversation with! I hesitated, but then I realized it was perhaps misguided modesty to not remove that dead part of you that was in the way of my writing. Typical human hubris, one might say, as is the fact that I sit here and write without a hat, without sunscreen on a high plateau with burning sun – simple stupidity again! But, when I came here this morning it was a lot cooler, and I was so excited to get my camera, so I forgot all precautions. I did bring a bottle of water, though. Now I understand why they say you are drought-resistant and tough, because growing here among the rocks, high up in the grassland, you obviously have to be. I wonder if the storm two days ago did fall down with rain here as well. Yes, probably, so you must be refreshed now. Although small, more like a shrub than a tree, at least compared to your relatives by the road, you look healthy and flourishing; not so many moths here, then. At least no brown spots on your leaves, although some of them are clearly eaten by some insects. But, no fungal disease or virus, as far as I can see. The word virus is ominous these days, at least in the human world, which is panicking about the pandemic, closing borders, forbidding meeting of more than ten people, cancelling meetings, events and performances. Luckily there is nobody to cancel our meeting here, nor our performance for the camera. Or our joint appearance here in the bushveld and in the image space. And I do not feel irresponsible towards you, because even though I would be a latent carrier of the virus, I could not transmit it to you ... That said, what about the virus of the other Firethorn Rhus in the Sculpture Park? Am I now carrying that virus from them to you, inadvertently? If it is a virus, that is. On the one hand I have not really touched you, I sit on a rock next to you. And on the other hand, I have showered and washed myself and even changed clothes after my last meeting with one of your relatives yesterday. – There is something strange about contagion and contamination, which is absolutely necessary as well as feared. If we don't keep contact with all kinds of life-forms, viruses, bacteria, insects, plants, our immune system goes crazy and starts to attack everybody around. The same is probably true for you as well. – A cloud, now, but a small one! The very brief moment of shade felt like such a luxury. Life is so sensitive, we all are, regardless of our life-form; we want a specific temperature, and specific humidity and what not. I wish I could be as tough and hardy as you, without losing my sensitivity, though. Is that an impossible paradox? You really are serene, when I look at you, and not any youngster, that is sure. The bark of your trunk is rather thick, but I understand that it does not make sense to grow much higher if

there is no competition for light. And the animals that eat you seem to be insects, which could follow you easily much higher, too. Some of your relatives are small rounded trees; perhaps I chose you exactly because you look so special, exactly like the two other Firethorn Rhus I've met, each in their own way. Probably you are the last in your family that I will spend time with, at least for a while, because soon it is time for me to leave and return to the panicking humanity. Thank you for letting me intrude into your space and hopefully to learn from your serenity, too. All the best for the future!

Both of these letters to the shrubs were written while sitting on or next to them. I also read, recorded the letters, and added them as voice-overs to the edited videos. The maximum duration of video that my camera can register in one go is 21 minutes, which means that the videos, without a voice-over, are 20 minutes long because I was writing for 20 minutes and more. Writing a text by hand is much slower than reading a transcript; therefore, the videos that are accompanied by the letters were shortened to only six minutes each. Despite the initial illusion that the text that I am speaking and the text that I am writing are the same, they do not coincide. This is evident, for instance, in the second video when I say, "A cloud now, but a small one!" and there is no cloud in sight.

These experiments with the Firethorn Rhus were my first attempts at using the letters written during the performance as voice-overs for the videos depicting the writing. My first attempt at writing a letter to a tree while sitting next to that same tree was with an ancient olive tree in Ulldesca in Catalonia (Spain) in December 2019. There, I did not think of reading and recording the text, but only archived the transcript of the text as a documentation of the act of writing.³⁵ The idea of adding the letter as the soundtrack to the video of my session with the Firethorn Rhus by the brook in the park probably came from my experience of recording the time-lapse video *Day with the Firethorn Rhus*³⁶ (March 17, 2020) the day before. Although I only archived my field notes³⁷ as text and did not read and record them nor add them to the video as planned, and as I had done in some previous time-lapse videos.³⁸

I tried to find ways to collaborate with the shrubs, rather than fall back on a disastrous opposition between "man" and "nature", like the hero, who finds himself in combat with the many-headed Hydra that carries him, and whose death is intertwined with his own end.

waiting greedily for total destruction with the hope of nothingness, the unending pause, or from fear of victory which could only be won by the total destruction of the beast which was his sojourn outside of which perhaps nothingness was already waiting for him or for no one.³⁹

Letters to trees in Paljakka forest

In NIROX, focussing on single shrubs seemed motivated because they stood out from the surrounding lawn or grassland despite being small. In Mustarinda, however, it seemed strange to single out individual trees rather than try to address the whole forest as a living being. At the end of my stay in Mustarinda in September, I decided, however, to return to my experiments of writing letters to trees and now also to explore different languages. In the nearby old-growth forest I wrote to and with three trees in three languages: To a spruce (*Picea abies*) in Finnish, to a birch (*Betula pubescens*) in Swedish, and to a dead spruce in English.⁴⁰ In the same manner, as with the letters to the shrubs in NIROX, these texts were recorded and added as voice-overs to the videos. The first of these letters “Rakas Kuusi” [Dear Spruce], the voice-over for *Dear Spruce*⁴¹, written on September 25 in Finnish, is here translated into English, and the translation is also added as subtitles to one version of the video:

Dear Spruce, or dearest spruce, thank you for providing this splendid seat right next to the forest path. Already walking here for the first time, in the beginning of September, right after arriving in Mustarinda house I noticed you and thought I could come and sit on your lap for a while. I can see from the photos I took. But then I completely forgot you, and even though I have walked past here almost daily, I have not noticed you at all. Only a few days ago, now, when September is nearing its end, I noticed you here by the path and remembered my previous plans. I stopped actually to look at the strange spruce stub only a few meters in front of me on the path. The spruce is broken, although its lowest branch remains alive and spreads like a large fan above the path. I stopped on this spot on the path already twice before while video recording the old impressively formed aspen tree, which stands sculptural here nearby. I was so concentrated on pondering how to record it, that I did not remember you at all. Only when placing the camera stand right next to you, I realized your presence. Please forgive my negligence, I clearly could have come to you much earlier. On the other hand, you have probably not missed my attention, or anybody to sit on your root burl, or what should I call this formation that grows on top your root. It is quite a fine lay-by and I am probably not the first human to sit here. I might be the first human, however, to sit here writing a letter to you. No, I will not hang these sheets of paper on a branch of yours, nor even bury them under your roots; this letter is only an attempt at focusing my thoughts, so that it would be easier for you to sense them. I am not sure if you can actually read thoughts, I doubt that you understand human language, but I could imagine that you can sense my presence in some way and perhaps also my thoughts on some level.

Scientists have realized that plants and therefore surely spruces, too, and you as well, have very diverse sensory capacities and they can see different qualities of light much better than humans with their eyes. Why couldn't they distinguish the intentions of humans in some manner, because it sure does make a difference if I am coming to fell the tree or in a peaceful mind to make acquaintance. Here in this forest, you do not have to be afraid of people beginning felling you, but storm winds or pack snow or their combination have felled many of your relatives. A completely moss-covered trunk in front of me might be a former spruce, although the more recent deceased lying on the ground is a birch. It is so rare to see all the stages of life in the same forest, when such a large part of the forest is so-called commercial forest, plantations of trees of more or less the same age. I wonder whether you know yourself how privileged you are, while allowed to grow here in peace from the beginning to the end of your life? Well, peace is of course a relative notion, there are people walking past here all the while, but anyway. Your trunk is full of all kinds of lichen, and they grow on your old and dry lower branches. And beard lichen, which is such a beautiful sign of clean air, at least so they say. Your crown is handsome and green and this root burl of yours does not seem to bother you at all, unless you count as a bother that some human beings might sit down here to rest for a while. It is actually a good reminder not needing to feel ashamed for one's handicap or the deformities that life creates on us. They can even be useful sometimes, if not for oneself, then for passers-by. Thank you for that encouragement, if it came to my mind from you. And with these provisions I will now continue my walk. All the best to you for the coming winter and thank you once more for your hospitality!

The idea expressed at the end of the letter, that a thought occurring to me while writing next to the spruce might be in some manner provided by the spruce; their contribution to the conversation, as it were, can be interpreted as a literary gesture, or as a response of sorts. With hindsight it seemed like a possible solution to the dilemma of communicating with trees, which was one of the reasons for writing letters to trees to begin with. If the communication takes place on the level of thoughts, the differences between human and plant language are no longer debilitating. The letter to a dead spruce, written on September while sitting on its fallen trunk and added to the video *Dear Deceased*¹², returns to the idea of the spruce joining the conversation even more explicitly at the end, suggesting that the spruce gave me specific thoughts. The letter was written in English and is presented here without editing:

Dear Spruce, dear deceased or departed, or whatever is the proper term for a respected and beloved dead being – because there is no doubt that you are dead, dead as a spruce, that is. Your body, broken and now separated from the roots, lies on the ground dry and dead like a skeleton, except that you are

steaming with life of all forms – insects, fungi, larvae, lichen, microbes, and all the things that I cannot see. And who knows what mice or other furry creatures have nests further up in your former crown? You are clearly serving your community also while dead. I am not sure how you decide whether a tree is dead or not, because some trees are able to grow new roots from their trunk, or at least new branches to form new trunks growing from a trunk fallen on the ground. Perhaps that is not possible for spruces, though. I have never seen one on any of the spruce cadavers, and there are plenty of them in this forest. On the other hand, your roots seem intact, everything below ground, although invisible to me, could be alive, and simply waiting for the right moment to throw some green needles up in the air. Well, deciduous trees are doing that, creating a whole selection of new stems and young trees from the cropped stump, but again probably not the spruces, I'm afraid. And it looks like your wood has been quite thoroughly eaten by insects, perhaps before you even fell to the ground – that could have been one of the reasons that you fell in the first place. Usually, the spruces around here seem to fall with their roots open, like losing their grip of the ground in a storm. But you are really broken midway, at the waist, well, at knee height, or wrists would probably be closer, if we use human measurements. I was attracted to you at first by the huge mushrooms that grow like small parasols from your stump, and then by the intricate forms of your almost bare branches that spread out from the trunk on the ground. Sitting on a corpse, on a cadaver, is morbid of course; and thinking of you as a rotting heap of life, all kinds of creatures busily trying to decompose you to minerals and nutrients, like a giant compost, does not make sitting here more pleasant. In actual fact your trunk seems rather steady and comfortable to sit on, not that different from a wooden bench, despite your rounded form and the slightly irregular, itchy bark. There is a small ant nest (small compared to the giant ones all around here) right at my feet – hopefully they are not disturbed by me, planning a defence attack. The sun is still warm, and it is very quiet, no wind. I wonder how many winters you have already been lying here, not that many, I suppose, but that is hard to know. There is no moss growing on top of you, but that might be simply because your branches keep you raised from the ground. And how many years will it take for you to decompose completely and turn into soil? In some places here you can still see the contours of a tree trunk in the moss, although most of the wood is gone and the moss cover is continuous. You are fertilizing the soil, I guess, whereas a human body decomposing on the ground would excrete poisonous substances, at least that is what I have heard. There is something fascinating in wood being such a living material, although it is clearly part of a dead tree, or a formerly living tree. I imagined I would sit here and think about death and dying, and the value of being able to witness the processes of decay instead of being protected from all such 'unpleasant details' by an overly hygienic and artificially maintained almost sterile environment. But instead, I am thinking of wood and what a marvellous material it is. I apologize for disturbing your

well-earned rest here in the forest with such human-centred and utilitarian thoughts. And, on the other hand I have to thank you for your generosity, because I like to think that you gave me those thoughts here, in some manner. Thus, many thanks for this moment on your beautiful trunk, and all the best for the coming winter!

These letters exemplify, besides my attempts at finding ways to address and encounter trees, how writing as an action performed for the camera, or performing writing, becomes a mode of automatic writing. The writing that takes place on these occasions is relatively freely associating in the moment, and results in texts that are sometimes inconsistent. They could of course be rewritten and edited before being read, recorded, and added to the video. Using the texts as they were written, more or less as the original traces of the performances, however, is more in line with a traditional real-time, real-body, real-action ethos of performance art, however questionable or illusionary that might be.

In the white silence which announced the beginning of the final round he learned to read the continually changing plans of the machine which he was ceased to be and again was different with each glance grip step, and he learned that he thought changed wrote it with the signature of his labours and deaths.⁴³

Writing with trees next to the trees

The experiments conducted in *NIROX* were the first ones where the letter written to the tree while performing for the camera, performing the writing, was recorded and added to the soundtrack of the video. *Dear Firethorn Rhus*⁴⁴ and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II*⁴⁵ were the first works resulting from this way of working. I also added the note “performed on 18 (or 19) March 2020 in Nirox residency” at the end of the videos to emphasize that they were performance documentations. The spoken text is much shorter than the writing of that same text in the video image, and no real synchronization is possible. The illusion of being able to follow the writing of the person in the image, as if she would speak to herself while writing, is nevertheless quite strong. This kind of illusion of presence makes the video more conventional in cinematic terms and gives importance to the text spoken. Much depends on how closely one can see the actions of the writer, and how the speaker phrases her sentences. The combination of writing a text and then speaking it as if written and spoken at the same time is something to explore further in the future, based on these first tentative experiments. Because they grew out of attempts to perform with trees, the interesting question is what kind of relationship they create between the writer and the addressee, the tree.

Performing the act of writing letters to trees for the camera is a peculiar way of trying to address trees or create an encounter or relationship with them. The use of human language, and especially written language, creates a barrier or fence between the human and the tree. A more promising strategy could be to focus on common features like breathing and growth. Plants seem to be immobile to our senses because they do not move in the same way as humans. Change of place is, however, only one of the four types of movement mentioned by Aristotle besides “growth, decay, and change of state or metamorphosis”.⁴⁶ Following philosopher Michael Marder, humans, animals, and plants are all “growing beings” although we are not always aware of it because “[t]he rhythms of growth, within and outside of us, diverge from those of human consciousness”.⁴⁷ Growth is thus one common denominator for plants and humans, something that we share, although the growth of plants is not directly visible to our senses. There is an “asynchrony between our attentive gaze and the movement of plants (as well as the physiology of our bodies)” which “renders vegetal life so foreign to the vitality of animals and humans, whilst leaving us with the impression that plants are immobile”.⁴⁸ He further notes: “If to perform is necessarily to bestow a form, then performing growth is tantamount to performing the un-performable”.⁴⁹ If growth is something that we share with trees and at the same time something un-performable, then I am faced with an impossible task of trying to perform growth for the camera together with trees. Turning to writing, however, seems only to make matters worse (Figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4).

In the context of the philosophical ecology developed by Erazim Kohák, “manners of speaking” are “modes of interacting with reality” which can “render our world meaningful and guide our actions therein”.⁵⁰ Seen from this perspective, addressing trees could be a meaningful activity, a choice between “treating trees as raw materials or treating them with respect”.⁵¹ While humans have transformed the planet, the role of plants as the first transformers of the planet and key players in maintaining it liveable for us tends to be overlooked. As Emanuele Coccia observes, “[p]lants, in their history and evolution, demonstrate that living beings produce the space in which they live rather than being forced to adapt to it”, and they “have modified the metaphysical structure of the world for good”.⁵² Forests are constantly creating and sustaining a biosphere in which we can perform in.

From another perspective, Eduardo Kohn, in *How Forests Think*, tries to develop an anthropology beyond the human, while emphasizing that this “beyond” both exceeds and includes the human. Kohn’s “anthropology beyond the human is still about the human, even though and precisely because it looks to that which lies beyond it” and this non-human and more-than-human world of the forest is “a ‘beyond’ that also sustains the human”.⁵³ Despite the title, his specific focus is not on forests, however, but on the various relations among humans, animals, and spirits in a corner of the Amazon rainforest with its colonial history, and particularly relationships between predator and prey. He suggests that “learning to attend to the kinds of lives that exist beyond the human (and beyond the moral), in ways

that allow the logics of life beyond the human to work their ways through us, is itself an ethical practice”.⁵⁴ Rather than moving away from the notion of representation he strives to understand representation in an expanded sense, as a semiosis that extends beyond the symbolic realm. Although Kohn does not teach us much about how forests think, at least not in terms of their vegetal constituents, and his examples of what he calls “selves” (humans, animals, spirits) that interpret signs in order to predict the future do not include plants or trees, his attempt can serve as inspiration for further explorations. And it is easy to agree with him as he contends that “if ‘we’ are to survive” the current era of disasters called the Anthropocene, “we will have to actively cultivate ... ways of thinking with and like forests”.⁵⁵ We have to learn to think in terms of systemic collaboration and mutual respect, for example with spruces or shrubs.

What would a performance-as-research beyond the human look like? Perhaps it could follow the advice of Ursula Le Guin “to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us”,⁵⁶ to imagine alternative ways of living together with other life forms. It would surely include humans, but also other animals, perhaps spirit masters and other figures encountered in dreams, and hopefully even the vegetal beings that continue to maintain the world liveable for us, among them all the remarkable and unremarkable trees. Addressing and perhaps even being addressed by some of them could be a way to begin to acknowledge their contribution. Usually, letters are written to those who are not present. Writing letters in the presence of the tree that is being addressed, and thus opening the possibility of being addressed by the tree as well, is perhaps more like a gesture of respect rather than an attempt at direct communication. As a gesture, its effects are probably stronger on the humans watching the video than on the tree itself. But can we know?

In NIROX



FIGURE 3.1 Dear Firethorn Rhus.



FIGURE 3.2 Dear Firethorn Rhus II.

In Mustarinda



FIGURE 3.3 Dear Spruce.



FIGURE 3.4 Dear Deceased.

Notes

- 1 Extract from “Herakles 2 or the Hydra” in the play *Cement* by Heiner Müller 1979, 37.
- 2 See the list of trees I met during my ARA residency, <https://meetingswithtrees.com/ara/>.

- 3 See the list of trees I interacted with in Mustarinda,
<https://meetingswithtrees.com/mustarinda/>.
- 4 For a brief presentation, see blog Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, <https://meetingswithtrees.com>.
- 5 “Herakles 2 or the Hydra” in the play *Cement* by Heiner Müller 1979.
- 6 See, for example, The Conscious Club’s “Oxygen and Deforestation”, <https://www.theconsciouschallenge.org/ecologicalfootprintbibleoverview/oxygen-deforestation> and Furtado, Sandra “The Important Relationship between Forests and Air”, <https://www.americanforests.org/blog/the-important-relationship-between-forests-and-air/>.
- 7 NOAA “How much Oxygen comes from the Ocean?”, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/ocean-oxygen.html>.
- 8 Australian Academy of Science “The Origins of Life on Earth”, <https://www.science.org.au/curious/space-time/origins-life-earth>.
- 9 Marder 2015, 186.
- 10 Marder 2018, n.p.
- 11 Kohn 2013.
- 12 Myers 2020.
- 13 Kimmerer 2020.
- 14 Marder 2013.
- 15 Coccia (2018).
- 16 Plumwood 2003, 56. See also the project presentation <https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/meetings-with-remarkable-and-unremarkable-trees/>.
- 17 Müller, 38.
- 18 Foster 2012, 42.
- 19 Foster 2012, 42–43.
- 20 Foster 2012, 54.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 See *In the River Bushwillow* (2020) 15 min 53 sec, performed on March 4, 2020 in The Wilds Park, Johannesburg, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=815789>. For information about the tree species, see <http://pza.sanbi.org/combretum-erythrophyllum>.
- 23 *With Henkel’s Yellowwood* (2020) 20 min 32 sec, performed on 4.3.2020 in The Wilds Park, Johannesburg, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=815793>. For details of the species, see <http://pza.sanbi.org/podocarpus-henkeli>.
- 24 *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg with Environs*, ARA Wits University 2020.
- 25 See definition of national parks <https://www.nationalparks.fi/nationalparks>.
- 26 See definition of nature reserves, <https://www.metsa.fi/en/lands-and-waters/protected-areas/nature-reserves/>.
- 27 See “More Trees in Mustarinda”, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/982302>.
- 28 Müller 1979, 39.
- 29 The first letter is published as a video essay “Dear Olive Tree” in JER (Arlander 2021) and a letter written to an Australian banyan tree in Alicante during the same trip is included in “Writing with Trees” (Arlander 2022).
- 30 “NIROX Sculpture Park is 30ha of cultivated lawns, arbors, fields, waterways, and wetlands, on the banks of the Blaauwbankspruit River adjoining the Kkatlhamphi Private Nature Reserve – a 1000ha wilderness of hills, valleys, riverine forests, caves, and highveld grasslands, populated with diverse local game and birdlife”, <https://www.niroxarts.com/sculpture-park>.

- 31 See description of *Rhus pyroides*, <https://www.randomharvest.co.za/South-African-Indigenous-Plants/Show-Plant/PlantId/588?Plant=Rhus%20pyroides>.
- 32 See *Day with the Firethorn Rhus*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433>.
- 33 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813>.
- 34 See *Dear Firethorn Rhus II*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675>.
- 35 See letters to Trees in Ulledecona and Alicante, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/820905>.
- 36 See *Day with the Firethorn Rhus* (24 min 10 sec), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433>.
- 37 See notes, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/822442>.
- 38 See examples of time-lapse videos with field notes recorded and added as voice-over: *Sunday with a Pine*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=410375>; *Grey Day in Rekdal*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=381354>; or *Day with a Juniper*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=662912>.
- 39 Müller 1979, 39.
- 40 I have continued experimenting with all three languages in later experiments and comparing my experiences would be a topic for another text.
- 41 See *Dear Spruce*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1001233>.
- 42 See *Dear Deceased (with text)*, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=1003945>.
- 43 Müller 1979, 40.
- 44 *Dear Firethorn Rhus (2020)* 20 min 15 sec and *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)* (2020) 6 min, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813>.
- 45 *Dear Firethorn Rhus II* (2020) 20 min 15 sec and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)* (2020) 6 min, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675>.
- 46 Marder 2015, 186.
- 47 Marder 2015, 187.
- 48 Marder 2015, 187.
- 49 Marder 2015, 187.
- 50 Kohák 1993, 385.
- 51 Kohák 1993, 383.
- 52 Coccia 2018, 10.
- 53 Kohn 2013, 225.
- 54 Kohn 2013, 225.
- 55 Kohn 2013, 227.
- 56 Le Guin 2017, 17.

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