



Annette Arlander

# Pondering with Contorta Pines

## Towards Post-humanist Approaches in Performance as Research

In this text I discuss the possibility of a post-humanist approach to performance as research with the help of three examples from Reykjavik, Iceland, where I performed with some Contorta pines on Öskjuhlid hill in 2022. Drawing on the pedagogical vision of Craig Holdrege concerning plants as teachers of context and transformation, John Hartigan's ethnographic adaptation of Holdrege's ideas as well as philosopher Michael Marder's and Emanuele Coccia's thoughts on the specific relationship between plants and site, I return to theatre historian Bruce McConachie's suggestion concerning the effects of performance, and consider the possibility of imaginatively restoring agency to non-humans by talking to them as well as the implications of focusing on context and process in performance as research.

Keywords:

Contorta pines, performance as research, post-humanism, context, process

In the current climate crises and accompanying ecological disasters, environmental injustices and species extinctions, the various forms of performing arts have been and are obliged to respond and shift their centre of attention from a narrow focus on human relationships to broader considerations of sharing the Earth and the biosphere with other life forms and learning to live together. Performance as research, too, must ask, how can we contribute to constructive post-humanist approaches?

That is how I began my brief talk “Shifting the Focus in Performance as Research” at the meeting of the Performance as Research Working Group of IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research)<sup>1</sup> during the conference in Reykjavik in midsummer time 2022.<sup>2</sup> In my abstract, I had proposed to take Craig Holdrege’s (2013) ideas on plants as teachers of context and transformation as a starting point for discussing possible methods for reconsidering our priorities in practice. And I hoped it could take place as part of a collaborative performance conversation related to the question in the PAR (performance as research) call: “How can PAR methodology be used to address and/or intervene in our uncertain and constantly shifting environmental reality? Can PAR forge a pathway for a post-humanist view?”<sup>3</sup> Because my focus has been mainly on working with trees in the project *Pondering with Pines*<sup>4</sup> and the podcast *Talking with Trees*,<sup>5</sup> which build on experiences from the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*,<sup>6</sup> the questions I proposed to add were the following: What kind of methods of performing can be used in performing together with a tree? Is anthropomorphizing the only solution? Can we imagine alternatives to role-play and fantasy? What can be learned from the so-called marginal traditions? In the context of a conference in theatre research, I have referred to performance art, site-specific somatic practices, performances for camera and work in the border zone of performance art, media art and environmental art (where I situate my own practice) as marginal traditions. Within these traditions performing with other beings in the environment is not as unusual as it might seem from a theatre stage. There are obviously many other types of forgotten or marginalized traditions such as indigenous knowledges, which PAR have much to learn from, although they are not my focus here.

As a colleague pointed out to me, pines are themselves performing, and they have been doing that long before humans “entered the stage” of the biosphere. The problem is rather, how can humans perform with the pines? This brings us back to the question: What kind of methods of performing can be used in performing together with a tree? Besides pos-

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1 Performance as Research Working Group of IFTR. <https://iftr.org/working-groups/performance-as-research>

2 IFTR World Congress “Shifting Centres” June 20–24, 2022, Reykjavik. <https://iftr.org/news/2021/november/call-for-papers-iftr-world-congress-20-24-june-2022-reykjavik-iceland>

3 Call for the Performance as Research Working Group of IFTR 2022, available online on the Research Catalogue (RC). <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1704779>

4 Arlander 2022a. *Pondering with Pines*.

5 Arlander 2022b. *Talking with Trees*.

6 Arlander 2020a. *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.

ing repeatedly for a video camera together with trees I have tried writing letters to trees, by the trees and later talking with trees. What else could I practice together with a pine tree? How could I further develop my practice of pondering with pine trees? After the conference I stayed a few days in Reykjavik to explore that. In this article I first present three talks with Contorta pines on Öskjuhlid hill. As befits a practice-based approach, I begin with a description of my practice and bring in some theoretical considerations after that. Then, I discuss learning from trees based on the ideas of Craig Holdrege as well as plants' special relationship to site with the help of Michael Marder's and Emanuele Coccia's thinking. After that I reflect on my methods compared with the approach of ethnographer John Hartigan and conclude by returning to the question of post-humanist performance as research.

## On Öskjuhlid hill

Reykjavik is a garden city nowadays, with plenty of trees everywhere, or so it seems compared to my memories of my first visit thirty years ago.<sup>7</sup> This time I stayed at a hotel at the outskirts of the city, near the domestic airport and the wooded hill Öskjuhlid with the landmark building Perlan on top. I took the opportunity to spend a few extra days after the conference looking for pine trees. On Öskjuhlid hill there were plenty of pines, although not the ordinary pines (*Pinus sylvestris*) I have performed with in Finland. They seemed to be some type of Contorta pines (*Pinus contorta*). Most of them have a more rounded shrub-like form and a grey bark. The ones I chose to perform with were especially contorted, providing branches to sit on. I approached several pines on Öskjuhlid hill and tried to address them by talking rather than writing as I had done before.<sup>8</sup> On two days, 25th and 27th of June, I tried talking with the pines at first and then simply listening to them.<sup>9</sup> All the talks with the pines take up similar issues – such as mentioning of some basic facts related to the site and Craig Holdrege's (2013) suggestion to consider plants as our teachers – probably because they were meant to be stand-alone pieces, not a series. Unlike some related experiments made previously,<sup>10</sup> I did not make podcast episodes of these talks and regarded them as explorations. Besides talking with pines, I made other experiments, for example, posing in a variety of ways with a pine in the rain or combining a static image of me recording the pine with my phone and the moving image recorded

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7 See Arlander 2022c. Project blog. "In Öskjuhlid Wood". June 28, 2022.

8 See for example, Arlander 2023.

9 The following videos are available online on the RC: *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (12 min 41 sec); *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (15 min 51 sec); *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 3* (14 min 2 sec), performed and recorded on 25th of June 2022; *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 4* (13 min 10 sec); *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (6 min 14 sec); *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (4 min 45 sec); and *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 3* (6 min 56 sec), performed and recorded on 27th of June 2022. See Arlander, 2022d. "With Pines on Öskjuhlid hill in Reykjavik".

10 See for example, Arlander 2022e. *Silakkarin männylle*.

by the phone in my hand.<sup>11</sup> All the resulting videos, including the transcripts of the talks, are included in the project archive on the Research Catalogue (RC)<sup>12</sup> and can be watched on a separate page.<sup>13</sup> In the following section, I will focus on the three pines that I talked with. The transcripts of the talks have been slightly edited for the ease of reading, although peculiarities of my spoken English are maintained. Footnotes have been added afterwards.

The first pine I met I filmed and recorded two conversations with, from two different perspectives, *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (12 min 41 sec) and *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (15 min 51 sec), mainly because of the noise from the airport nearby, which disturbed the first one. The two talks are very similar, therefore only the second one is included here.



Figure 1. *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

## Öskjuhlid hill 25th of June 2022

Hello pine. Good morning or good day. I don't know how to call you, so I apologise if you feel that I am rude when I say hello pine or hello Contorta pine, if you are a Contorta pine.<sup>14</sup> That is what I think the pine trees here are, because they are decidedly different from the so-called Scots pines at home in Finland. I am a visitor here and I wanted to come to you today and ask you about the way of living here. We are very near Reykjavik domestic airport and there is something going on now because there is a constant noise. I guess you are used to it, but it makes our conversation difficult, for me at least. You are growing next to the path on the southern slope of the Öskjuhlid

11 See Arlander 2022f. "Pines for PSi – Artistic Research Working Group".

12 Arlander 2022g. *Pondering with Pines* project archive on the RC.

13 See Arlander 2022d. "With Pines on Öskjuhlid hill in Reykjavik".

14 See the Gymnosperm Database. Entry for "Pinus Contorta". [https://www.conifers.org/pi/Pinus\\_contorta.php](https://www.conifers.org/pi/Pinus_contorta.php)



Figure 2. *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

hill, if I pronounce it anywhere near correct, and near the university. I can see from the ground around you that I am not the first person to come and sit on your branches. I guess you are a favourite selfie spot for many people. Maybe somebody has even talked to you or addressed you in some manner.

I realised that my memories of Reykjavik are of a treeless city. And although I never came here on my first visit many, many years ago, but stayed in the centre and then went to the north, it is hard for me to understand how the whole city is now filled with trees. I had to look back in my CV to realise that my first visit to Reykjavik was in 1992, that is 30 years ago. Of course, trees grow in 30 years if you allow them and if you plant them. I don't know if you were here 30 years ago, probably, and I also guess that you have been planted. Although I am not sure if all the trees here in this wood are planted, or if the first ones were planted and then the rest have grown as their offspring.

And now finally, the airplanes or helicopters disappeared, for a moment at least. I was at a conference, describing my practice with some pine trees in Helsinki and Stockholm, and referring to the ideas of Craig Holdrege about thinking like a plant, where he suggests that we should consider plants as our teachers.<sup>15</sup> When it comes to trees, and especially pine trees, I think that's really appropriate. I would love to be able to learn from you something about this place. He maintains that plants can teach us rootedness, and sensitivity to context and site, because you embody literally, in your form, the qualities of the circumstances where you live. And that makes me think, what made you grow such branches, spreading out on the ground in all directions? Were you hurt, when young, somehow bent or broken? Or is it simply in order to protect

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15 Holdrege 2013, 5.

your trunk from falling in hard wind? Or? I don't know. Could it be that people were sitting on your lap already when young, so you decided to somehow surrender to that, and provide these branches? Well, this sounds like a somewhat anthropomorphising expression, but this idea that I could learn about the place from looking at you and touching you, and listening to you...

The other thing that he suggests that we could learn from plants, and that I would love to learn from you, is the idea of process, of living thinking, instead of object thinking, of dynamic thinking in growth and decay, and transformation. Because you are transforming all the time, slowly, but nevertheless, all the time. We humans do that, too, but we are not accustomed to thinking like that. Or maybe we are. When you get older, you realise that things change. Nevertheless, I think I would have a lot to learn from you. Now, what I would like to learn, because this idea of dynamic process concerns all plants, but this specific site is really special. And it is special in many ways. The whole country is special by being so far in the north, but something that we humans could learn from here is how to regenerate areas that we have destroyed. Because the first settlers to Iceland destroyed the forest, they had to in order to survive. And I read on a wall in the city centre that the first trees were planted in Reykjavik in 1700 when there was a prison here, a Danish prison.<sup>16</sup> If I think of how much has been done in trees, tree-wise, since my last visit, or rather my first visit 30 years ago, that is astonishing.

The sound of the airplanes circulating in a weird manner reminds me of another legacy of this site, which is the military remains from the Second World War, when there was the British Air Force that built the airport and used the hill to hide large fuel tanks.<sup>17</sup> Of course, you were probably not here at that time. Or if you were, you were really young, but the site carries remains from that time. I wonder how it feels to have those airplanes make that noise all the time? Probably there is something special going on today because it is Midsummer day, the 25th of June, although I don't know why they celebrate that by all these airplanes or helicopters or whatever they are. Maybe you are accustomed to these regular noises nearby. Only when they are more distant can I hear the birds. I guess this is a special time for you as well as for us humans, because now the days are getting shorter again, slowly. Of course, it might get warmer for a while, but the light diminishes now. It doesn't feel like diminishing yet, because there is plenty of light and the sun is high up almost until midnight, but it is turning now. I guess your life is even more dependent on light as the life of us humans. But now I'm rambling instead of listening to you. So rather than keep up with this endless monologue I will let you have a say before the airplanes return. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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16 Björgulfsdóttir 2023.

17 Ward 2017.

The conversation with the second pine, *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 3* (14 min 2 sec), is recorded later the same day and covers many of the same topics. The transcribed text is edited in a similar manner removing some words like “sort of” and other expressions used in spoken language. The videos begin and end with me entering and exiting the image to show how the artworks were made and to accentuate the real-time effect.



Figure 3. *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 3* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

### Öskjuhlid hill 25th of June 2022

Hello pine, hello Contorta pine, if you are a Contorta pine. Pleased to meet you here on the Öskjuhlid hill, if I pronounce it correctly, in Reykjavik. It is sunny but very windy, so I hope the wind will not destroy our conversation. There is some noise in the background, not only from the wind but from the airport, but it is not as bad as this morning. It is Midsummer day, the 25th of June, and I have had the opportunity to spend a day meeting pine trees and walking along the shore. You are very strong-looking and special, especially you, and all of your kin and there are plenty of you. You look exotic to me because you are different than the pine trees I am used to, the Scots spines in Finland. If you are a Contorta pine you can adapt to very different types of circumstances, and you are growing mostly in North America. I read that most of the pine trees that have been planted in Iceland for timber production are Contorta pines.<sup>18</sup> Here on the hill you grow almost in a shrub-like form. In some sense it is rude of me to come here and just sit in your lap, as it were, taking for granted that you accept such an intimate contact. But you are growing next to a path, and I can see that people, human beings have walked nearby many times. I cannot believe that they would not have tried to sit here because you are providing such a beautiful branch to sit on.

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<sup>18</sup> Pomrenke 2022.

Now when the evening is approaching it is really chilly, but this is nevertheless the warmest time of the year. I am impressed by the thought of you standing here all through the Icelandic winter, which is probably rather cold, rather wet, and rather windy. This is a special place, this hill, and this wood, because there are not that many woods in Iceland, although there are some, nowadays. This site was used for military purposes by the British Air Force during the Second World War, and they also built the airport right behind us. I wonder what would be the best way [sic] I could learn from you. Because as Craig Holdrege, however that [sic] is pronounced, proposes, we should try to learn to think like plants.<sup>19</sup> And that goes for trees as well, or maybe especially trees. I am engaged in a project called *Pondering with Pines*,<sup>20</sup> so I am wondering what topic would be interesting to reflect on or contemplate here with you.

The two ideas that Holdrege emphasises, the ones that I remember him emphasising, are plants as teachers of context, of situation, of the importance of the circumstances. And on the other hand, plants as teachers of process, of living, dynamic thinking, as opposed to object thinking. The part which concerns the context, the site, the circumstances, the surroundings, the situation, that is very easy to understand, because you are rooted here, and you express in your body the characteristics of the place you are living in. But what about transformation, processual thinking? It is perhaps more difficult to understand, except that your continuously transforming body is evidence of that, too. Like the lower branches that I am touching right now, which are older and have lost their needles, and the upper branches that are full of needles and seem green and lush.

It is difficult to imagine what made you grow into this form. What kind of decisions you had to make, in order to produce so many branches and twists. It depends on, or... I wonder if you consider yourself as a collective, as many philosophers suggest that trees or plants are.<sup>21</sup> To use terms such as “consider oneself” sounds anthropomorphising, but what I mean is that you have a very specific way of organising your growth and your form because you really practice democracy as I would expect. I cannot know, but if I understand biologists and botanists and philosophers engaged with plants, your different parts have quite a lot of agency, separately. You are self-organising, not centrally organised, and your different parts are more or less self-organising, but nevertheless synchronised. That is admirable, something we humans should learn from you as well.

This idea of not only adapting to circumstances, but creating your own circumstances is interesting as well.<sup>22</sup> Because by planting trees and helping the trees, after a while the trees, you, create your own habitat, your own circumstances, your own microclimate. You produce your soil; you create a wood or a forest. And that is also

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19 Holdrege 2013, 5.

20 Arlander 2022h. “Pondering with Pines” online project presentation for Uniarts Helsinki.

21 Marder 2013, 85.

22 Coccia 2019, 10.

reassuring in a strange way that it is possible to recreate some kind of forests, because humans did destroy them here as I understand. They had to, to survive. And then they did not realise that the trees could not grow back because their world was destroyed. But by planting new trees, even though maybe not native trees, a new world is created, slowly, but still. What else can I say here when I am freezing? The sun is now behind the clouds. What else can I say, except congratulations for creating this world, this wood here on this hill, that we humans also can enjoy. And good luck for continuing with that work. Thank you. Thank you.

The conversation with the third pine, *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 4* (13 min 10 sec), was recorded two days later with a pine tree next to a path and was interrupted or perhaps invigorated by a human passer-by. The talk brings up the problem and difficulty of listening.



Figure 4. *With a Pine in Öskjuhlid 4* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

## Öskjuhlid hill 27th of June 2022

Hello pine, hello Contorta pine; I hope you are a Contorta pine. Thank you for letting me sit here on your branch on Öskjuhlid hill. I have been talking with some of the pines here and elsewhere as part of the project *Pondering with Pines*.<sup>23</sup> Today I wanted to try to listen to you more than talk, because usually I am often talking so much that I never really give the pine a chance to say what they need to say in their manner. The noise we hear now is from an airplane because we are near the domestic airport,

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<sup>23</sup> Arlander 2022h.

which was actually built by the British Air Force during the Second World War. This hill is full of remains from that time. But it is also a forest or wood or recreational area quite near the centre of Reykjavik and on the hill, there is this entertainment complex named Perlan, which sits on top of some water containers. There used to be containers of fuel for the aircrafts hidden among the cliffs here, but now it is a place for humans to walk around and enjoy. And here comes one human... (a human walks by, smiling).

Yes, I wonder if I should ask you something or just wait for some thoughts to come to my mind if they would somehow be induced or inspired by your preferences. It is not very easy to sense your ideas or your energy. Some people can do that, but I am not one of them. Nevertheless, it is clearly very urgent that we learn to communicate in some manner, or if not to communicate at least to consider your preferences, your thoughts. They say that Contorta pines are very adaptable, and can survive in harsh circumstances, harsh in different ways. And in the typical language of our society, that is expressed as that you have a competitive advantage; in a competitive situation, you will be the winner because you can survive many hardships. That is a strange way to think of it. But this idea of adapting to circumstances and make the most of the situation you happen to grow in and to create your own world in collaboration with other creatures, that is something we should learn from you. I try to listen to you and today there is not so much wind, so it should be possible to hear something else than the wind. But what I can hear is only human airplanes and helicopters and other noises and then some birds, luckily, but I cannot hear you. I can sense you, but your bark is not very welcoming, I must say. I guess it is supposed to protect you from all kinds of intruders, like me.

I am fascinated by your way of growing because most of your branches are dry and dead and somehow abandoned and only very high up in your crown, you have fresh needles. I wonder if it is because you are growing so tightly with other pines and other trees here in this wood that you focus your photosynthetic energy only there where you have light and abandon all your old branches. It cannot be because it is too dry because there is so much water here, so much rain all the time. And it does not look like it would be a disease. So, it seems like a choice of yours or a habit. That is another thing that I would like to learn from you, this idea of abandoning things, letting them be, leaving them behind, or not behind because you still carry your branches, they are not falling away, but you are not trying to keep them alive or green.

Or how could I know what you are trying to do. Maybe I should study more about pines, instead of taking the shortcut and coming to you directly, trying to ask you, trying to feel from your body the wisdom of your body. Perhaps I should trust human translators, scientists and botanists and biologists. And here comes the human again. (The human returns and walks by). Maybe that is a sign that I should leave you alone and thank you for this session. So, thank you for this session and all the best for the future.

After these three talks with pines, I recorded three sessions of listening, simply sitting still in a pine listening to them or with them: *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (6

min 14 sec), *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (4 min 45 sec) and *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 3* (6 min 56 sec), the last two with the same pine with a slightly different framing of the image.<sup>24</sup> The act of listening is of course not visible or audible in the same way as talking, and the experience of the performer and the viewer are, therefore, even more distinct than in the talks. As mentioned, I also made some other experiments with the pines on the hill, such as creating a split screen video with a static shot of the pine showing me recording the pine with my phone combined with footage of moving close-ups of the pine recorded with the phone in my hand. Another experiment was posing in various positions in relationship to a pine such as leaning, pushing, hanging, lying against et cetera.<sup>25</sup> Although performing non-verbally is a more equitable way of collaborating with pines, I leave these other experiments aside here, when looking closer at the pines as teachers based on the conversations.



Figure 5. *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 1* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

## Learning from pines

In the last conversation I wondered: “Maybe I should study more about pines, instead of taking the shortcut and coming to you directly, trying to ask you, trying to feel from your body the wisdom of your body”. As mentioned in all three talks, Craig Holdrege suggests that plants can teach us through the way they respond to their site and situation and through their processual way of being. In his remarkable book *Thinking like a*

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<sup>24</sup> See Arlander 2022d, “With Pines on Öskjuhlid hill in Reykjavik” and scroll down the page <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1697149>.

<sup>25</sup> See Arlander 2022f, “Pines for PSi – Artistic Research Working Group” and scroll down the page <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1702735>.

*Plant* (2013) Holdrege takes up Goethe's idea of plant metamorphosis and applies it to his work with plants as pedagogical tools. The main chapters of his book are titled "From Object Thinking to Living Thinking", "Rooted in the World", "The Plant as Teacher of Transformation", "The Plant as Teacher of Context", "The Story of an Organism", and "Conclusion: A Quiet Revolution". Learning about transformation and process on the one hand and about site and context on the other hand made sense to me and seem relevant, especially in terms of performance as research.

According to Holdrege "the plant grows and transforms according to its own inner pattern" while it is also "adjusting itself at all times to what it takes in from the environment" in a way that is "dynamic, connected, resilient, and [--] always in relation to the world into which it grows".<sup>26</sup> He wonders why humans could not be like that, and suggests that we should adopt plants as "our teachers of living thinking".<sup>27</sup> A plant displays in its form and being the characteristics of "the environment of which it is a part" and by observing plants "we are seeing through them the qualities of the environment".<sup>28</sup> They can, therefore, teach us that "life is eminently contextual",<sup>29</sup> Holdrege adds.

We can also study transformation with plants, learn to appreciate the "rhythmic interplay of growth and decay", the constant changes of "an organism that manifests itself over time", and try to become aware of life as a process of "unfolding, growing and dying, transformation, dynamism, rhythm, and a unifying stream of creativity that brings forth diversity in an organism".<sup>30</sup> Plants can teach us "to establish a dynamic cognitive relation to the world" so that "our thinking becomes more dynamic".<sup>31</sup> Like all forms of vegetation the pine trees are in a process of constant transformation, albeit more slowly than smaller, annual plants. Holdrege summarizes the various teachings that plants can offer: "The plant shows us how to live in transformation; it shows us context sensitivity; it shows us the unique nature of organisms; it shows us how to overcome an object-relation to the world".<sup>32</sup> Or, with an emphasis on the two aspects I found easy to appreciate, plants can help us understand and value both transformation and context or process and place; they are experts in durational and site-specific performance.<sup>33</sup>

In stressing the contextual aspect of vegetal life, Holdrege is not alone. Philosopher Michael Marder (2013) notes the inseparability of plant and place; a vegetal being must "remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows", and its relation to the elements is not domineering but receptive.<sup>34</sup> The plant is a collective of sorts, a "non-totalizing

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26 Holdrege 2013, 1.

27 Holdrege 2013, 5.

28 Holdrege 2013, 9.

29 Holdrege 2013, 9.

30 Holdrege 2013, 7.

31 Holdrege 2013, 8.

32 Holdrege 2013, 10.

33 See Arlander 2024a. "Trees as experts in site-specificity".

34 Marder 2013, 69.

assemblage of multiplicities”.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Marder suggests that thinking is not the sole privilege of the human subject and introduces the notion of a vegetal “it thinks”, where “it” refers to an undecided subject. “It thinks” is not concerned with “who or what does the thinking?” but “when and where does the thinking happen?” because it arises from and returns to the plant’s embeddedness in the environment.<sup>36</sup> Marder comments on Gregory Bateson’s much-quoted thesis “the unit of survival is *organism plus environment*”<sup>37</sup> and notes how “plant-thinking, immanent to the milieu wherein it thrives, will be the signpost of, or a concrete normative ideal for, the Batesonian version of *it thinks*”.<sup>38</sup> The vegetal “*it thinks* will moderate the lethal tendencies of the human *I think*, neglectful of the non-individuated foundations of thought and of the context integral to its formalization”.<sup>39</sup> According to Marder, all radically contextual thought is an inheritor of vegetal life.<sup>40</sup>

Emanuele Coccia, another philosopher writing about plants, concurs that “[o]ne cannot separate the plant – neither physically nor metaphysically – from the world that accommodates it”.<sup>41</sup> He emphasises, however, that plants not only adapt to their circumstances but actively create them; “in their history and evolution” plants “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”.<sup>42</sup> Coccia analyses the relationship between container and contained. “When there is life”, he explains, “the container is located in the contained (and is thus contained by it); and vice versa”.<sup>43</sup> This seems convoluted but makes sense through the example of breathing; while breathing we are “immersed in a medium that penetrates us with the same intensity as we penetrate it”.<sup>44</sup> In the words of Coccia, “[t]he air we breathe is [--] the breath of other living beings”,<sup>45</sup> we are dependent on this exchange, “every day we feed off the gaseous excretions of plants. We could not live but off the life of others”.<sup>46</sup> When I am talking with a pine tree, we are breathing together exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide and all the other chemicals in the air.

For Coccia, “to penetrate the surrounding environment is to be penetrated by it [--] in all space of immersion, to act and to be acted upon are formally indistinguishable”.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, “the relation between the container and the contained is constantly reversi-

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35 Marder 2013, 85.

36 Marder 2013, 169.

37 Bateson 2000, 491, cited in Marder 2013, 167.

38 Marder 2013, 168.

39 Ibid.

40 Marder 2013, 169.

41 Coccia 2019, 5.

42 Coccia 2019, 10.

43 Ibid.

44 Coccia 2019, 11.

45 Coccia 2019, 47.

46 Ibid.

47 Coccia 2019, 37.

ble: what is place becomes content, what is content becomes place”.<sup>48</sup> And further, “the medium becomes subject and the subject becomes medium”.<sup>49</sup> Plants also demonstrate continuous transformation. “‘To be’ means for them, to *make world* [faire monde]”.<sup>50</sup> Coccia claims that “*the existence of every living being is necessarily a cosmogonic act* and that a world is always, simultaneously a condition of possibility and a product of the life it hosts”.<sup>51</sup> Or, in other words, “every organism is the invention of a way of producing the world”.<sup>52</sup> This does not mean separate niches or life-worlds because “being in the world means to exercise influence especially outside one’s own space, outside one’s own habitat, outside one’s own niche”.<sup>53</sup> According to Coccia “the totality of the world one lives in [--] is and will always be infested by others”.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, “the world is by definition the life of others: the ensemble of other living beings”.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, we inevitably perform for and with each other whatever we do. The challenge is to remember, recognize and give credit to the various co-performers we usually forget about or take for granted.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that there are other things we can learn from pines, besides the importance of transformation and context emphasised by Holdrege, such as patience and perseverance, or how to become still and silent for a moment, or how to appreciate the diversity of living beings.<sup>56</sup> One can enlist trees as teachers in various ways, depending on one’s focus. While I was visiting a pine tree in Kaivopuisto Park during that same year 2022, my practice consisted of three actions or poses performed for the camera with the old pine. First, I practiced power, rootedness, and grounding by doing the tree pose from Taiji, with bent knees, straight back and arms raised in front of me at shoulder height while facing the pine. Then I practiced expansion, stretch and balance by reaching up on my toes towards the sky in the two-legged tree pose from yoga, while focusing on the trunk of the pine. Finally, I received support and energy from the pine by holding on to the pine’s branch, learning about empathy with other living beings in the world. I did not plan what to learn from the tree or what the pine tree could teach me, but rather, as befits a performance as research approach, I practiced these poses repeatedly and considered what they might teach me only afterwards.

In talking with the Contorta pines on Öskjuhlid hill, and in listening to them or with them, the element of repetition, which is important in learning, was missing. Returning repeatedly to the same pine and creating time-lapse works, which show the transformation of the tree and the site, was not possible during a short visit. Creating several variations, like the three letters above, was perhaps an attempt to compensate for that. What

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48 Coccia 2019, 27.

49 Ibid.

50 Coccia 2019, 38.

51 Coccia 2019, 38.

52 Ibid.

53 Coccia 2019, 43.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Arlander 2022i, 262.

the pines could teach us is expressed in the third conversation as follows: “this idea of adapting to circumstances and make the most of the situation you happen to grow in and to create your own world in collaboration with other creatures, that is something we should learn from you”. This idea is of course something that many artists working with site-specific performance already know.

## Interview or perform, write, or talk?

When returning to the conversations with the Contorta pines I came across a text called “How to interview a plant” (2017), where John Hartigan, an ethnographer, tries to consider plants as ethnographic subjects with the help of Holdrege’s methods. The ideas he focuses on while doing his fieldwork are different, however, than the ones that I found inspiring. He is for example observing plants by drawing, something I never tried, and follows the two complementary types of sensory observation exercises that Holdrege recommends. The first one is based on concentrated attention by sketching the plant and the second one is letting one’s attention spread out, waiting to find out what will appear.<sup>57</sup> Hartigan gravitates towards talking with people that are working with plants in various ways. He structures his account of his fieldwork in a botanical garden in sections with the following subtitles, like an ethnographer’s manual:

First Step: Read the Literature [--] Second Step: Find a Location [--] Third Step: Reflexivity [--] Fourth Step: Description [--] Fifth Step: Theorize [--] Sixth Step: Transect Walk [--] Seventh Step: Make Connections [--] Eighth Step: Contextualize [--] Ninth Step: Analysis.<sup>58</sup>

Hartigan begins by reading as is customary in social sciences and humanities and only after that he chooses the site. I usually begin by choosing a site although I might do some reading, for example search for some facts about Contorta pines, albeit only after meeting them. Hartigan is interested in the social life or community structure of the pines.<sup>59</sup> That was not my focus; I did not try to interview the pine trees, but rather talk to them, have a conversation with them, although the conversations inevitably turned into monologues. Thinking of Hartigan’s list, we could perhaps say that I am mainly engaged with reflexivity and description in this text, while theorising is limited to a discussion of Holdrege’s, Marder’s and Coccia’s ideas in relation to my examples. I have contextualised my approach in relation to critical plant studies elsewhere.<sup>60</sup> Some preliminary analysis is nevertheless needed in terms of performance as research.

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<sup>57</sup> Hartigan 2017, 255.

<sup>58</sup> Hartigan 2017, 254–279.

<sup>59</sup> Hartigan 2017, 256.

<sup>60</sup> See for example, Arlander 2023 in a previous issue of this publication or Arlander 2019, 2020b, and 2022i.

Because the pines were not my informants or subjects to be interviewed and observed but rather partners to perform with, my criteria for focusing on specific pines were practical: what kind of posing together would the pine support, could I perhaps sit on a branch, how could the pine be framed in the image, what would the background look like, where could the camera tripod be placed in terms of the light or possible passers-by et cetera. One interesting question in terms of performance was the use of talking as opposed to writing in these examples, and especially talking without a script or even notes. When recording an impromptu speech, something of the real-time and real-effort flavour of performance art can be retained even in documentation, unlike when writing a letter to a tree.<sup>61</sup> The talk can be synchronised with the video recording as a real-time documentation of a performance. It cannot be edited afterwards, unlike a text that is written as a performance in front of the camera but read and recorded later and added as a voice-over to the video. When transcribing a handwritten text for a recording, small mistakes can be corrected, and formulations can be polished. When reading and recording the written text one can focus on the tone and the interpretation, the acting, if you wish. Reading is inevitably faster than writing and not even an approximate synchronisation is possible; the voice-over is therefore exactly that, a voice on top of the image. The challenges are different when recording an ex-tempore talk that is spoken and improvised – although perhaps prepared to some extent – and invented during the recording. There focus is rather on formulating ideas and producing the text, as in an ordinary conversation. The situation is vulnerable to external circumstances, however; sudden noises or the wind can easily destroy parts of the recording, and interruptions or mistakes cannot be corrected. The whole performance might need to be repeated. An example is the human passer-by in the third letter, and my surprised acknowledgement of them. Such limitations are obvious when videos are made into podcast episodes. Unlike other similar short-term experiments, I did not make these conversations with Contorta pines into podcast episodes on *Talking with Trees*,<sup>62</sup> or rather, I did make one episode but never published it.

In the context of performance research and theatre research the shift from producing text by writing to producing text by talking can be compared with various types of structured improvisations where performers are given the task to generate text in the situation, beginning with Stanislavsky's etudes for actors or so-called instant composition in contact improvisation. In these cases, the aim was to a lesser extent on creating a convincing or interesting performance or on producing something new, but rather on receptivity to impulses in the moment. What is gained in spontaneity and synchronisation with the image is lost in concise formulations or literary quality. That is not inevitable, however. Much depends on the task or prompt and the preparations. The important point is that by allowing space for impulses from the environment and a possibility to react to them the pine tree has a chance to influence the situation, no matter how that influence

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61 See Arlander 2024b. "Writing to Trees with the Trees – experiments in NIROX and Mustarinda".

62 Arlander 2022b.

is understood to take place. In the conversation with the third pine I asked: “I wonder if I should ask you something or just wait for some thoughts to come to my mind, if they would somehow be induced or inspired by your preferences”. And I noted how “it is not very easy to sense your ideas or your energy. Some people can do that, but I am not one of them”. However, I emphasised that “it is clearly very urgent that we learn to communicate in some manner, or if not to communicate at least to consider your preferences, your thoughts”. This is obviously relevant for developing not only performance as research but any kind of sustainable practices of co-existing on our planet.

## Concluding remarks

This brings us to the question we began with: how can performance as research contribute to constructive post-humanist approaches? Although he does not mention performance or performing arts, author Amitav Ghosh eloquently expresses the challenges performance as research faces today:

This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans. As with all the most important artistic endeavours in human history, this is a task that is at once aesthetic and political – and because of the magnitude of the crises that besets the planet, it is now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency.<sup>63</sup>

What does restoring agency mean? How should that be done? And is it enough to do it imaginatively? What does “giving voice” entail? Putting words in the mouths of others, like authors of fiction tend to do? Could visibility be a form of agency, or is it only one more type of exploitation? Can we simply include other beings like pine trees as our partners in performance and assume it has some effect? In his article “Ethics, Evolution, Ecology and Performance” theatre historian Bruce McConachie suggested that the “arts are not secondary reflections of experience; imaginative engagement in the arts provides real experiences that change who we are and can motivate progressive change in the world”.<sup>64</sup> He claimed that “[t]he experience of art is just as real as other experiences in the material world and all experiences have consequences”.<sup>65</sup> If he is right, then how we consider trees, the manner in which we look at them and speak or think about them or about other non-human agents really matters. And it matters also in reverse. By not taking other beings into consideration nor including them in our performances we neglect them as irrelevant. “By rearranging the materiality of our minds, performances in all media can exert performative pressure on our conceptions of social roles, governmental

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63 Ghosh 2021, 204.

64 McConachie 2012, 98.

65 Ibid.

policies, and ecological realities”.<sup>66</sup> McConachie’s expression “ecological realities” is pertinent and could in many cases replace the much-misused expression “economic realities”. Moreover, according to McConachie, “all artistic practice that successfully foregrounds body-environment interactions is always already ecological”.<sup>67</sup> This sounds reassuring.

For some decades now theatre researchers have approached post-human perspectives on performance in terms of ecology.<sup>68</sup> There has been a tendency, however, to overvalue the efficacy of performance, to assume it as an a priori “progressive force”.<sup>69</sup> As an antidote, there has been an interest in theatre’s ability for undoing (false pretence) rather than doing (effective change).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, theatre often seems to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Much depends on where you start and how you understand performance. If your idea of performance is based on dramatic theatre or spectacular shows with heavy technology and large crowds, you obviously need to be reminded of the limits to its ecological efficacy. If you think of performance as minimal actions with few if any witnesses, it can make sense to point out that *all* actions have consequences.

If we remember Marder’s suggestion to focus on relationships between various entities, and on where and when thinking takes place, rather than who is doing the thinking, we could expand this kind of relational and contextual thinking to all kinds of actions, including performance as research. Marder’s ideas on plant-thinking could help develop the methodologies of performance as research. To think of assemblages instead of self-identical subjects makes sense in many types of performances, whether in terms of a collaborating ensemble working collectively, trying to avoid the traditional hierarchies of the theatre stage, or a small assemblage of agents like a pine tree, a human body, a phone as sound recorder and a video camera on tripod, in my examples. To think of the connections and gaps between the participants rather than the participants themselves as self-enclosed entities is relatively easy through the legacy of theatrical traditions that emphasise ensemble work. It is not only what you do but how your colleagues respond to your action that produces the character on stage, to mention one example. To focus on relationships and connections between human actors, whether performers or other contributors, is easy to remember, even in traditional forms, where the division of labour and the hierarchies of production never completely obscure the ethos of the whole being more than the parts. To extend this understanding to include not only various material-discursive practices and conditions for action but also other living beings, even the possibility of the environment being alive, is another thing. In my examples the pine trees are living beings, co-performers that are addressed and listened to. In a conventional performance as research setting with a group of people indoors, remembering and articulating the relationship to “an outside”, a site and context, an environment, a milieu, the “when and where” something takes place can be an important step. And it can be difficult because performance

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66 Ibid.

67 McConachie 2012, 93.

68 See for example, Kershaw 2007.

69 Lavery 2016, 232.

70 Lavery 2016, 230.

practices often centre on human beings that are deliberately taken out of their context. Therefore, focusing on the contextual requirements and assumptions can bring us one step towards a more inclusive and systemic understanding of performance as research.

If we take into account Coccia's claim that to act and to be acted upon are formally indistinguishable in immersive situations,<sup>71</sup> we can assume, based on McConachie's ideas,<sup>72</sup> that our performances are not only acted upon by their environments but act upon these in turn. Coccia's description of the relationship of mutual containment of living beings<sup>73</sup> seems meaningful for performance and performance as research; our performances are not only influenced by their surroundings, but they also influence their environment. They have consequences and an impact on the world, whether we like it or not. And they have an impact on us; not only how we perform but where and with whom we perform are constantly forming us. And this includes the beings we perform for, our audiences, and those we perform with, like Contorta pines.

In these examples it is the relationship between the pine tree and the human performer rather than either one of them that is relevant. Rather than removing the human and letting the pine tree take centre stage, as is sometimes expected when speaking of plants performing, the challenge is to create a balance between the two. And to remember and acknowledge other elements in the collaboration, such as the technology used. The use of talking puts emphasis on the human, although the contextual information thus included serves as a balancing force. The use of video technology puts less pressure on the environment, when audiences do not need to witness the performance on site, but the technology depletes rare minerals and non-renewable resources. Moreover, although video works have some efficacy and give visibility to the pine and the site, they are a poor substitute for being outdoors with the trees. What would be a more equitable way of performing together with pine trees and a more constructive post-humanist approach to performance as research thus remains a topic for further investigation. I nevertheless suggest that considering the two propositions voiced by Holdrege – to let plants teach us, on the one hand, about site and context and, on the other, about transformation and process – is a good place to start. Especially while context and process are already relevant for many types of contemporary performance.

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71 Coccia 2019, 37.

72 McConachie 2012, 98.

73 Coccia 2019, 27.



Figure 6. *Listening to a Pine in Öskjuhlid 2* (video still). Human sitting on the low branch of a tree.

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