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Arlander, Annette

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Annette Arlander

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Ryan Honeyball

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Stacey Vorster









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Annette Arlander

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Preface

As part of the Arts Research Africa (ARA) residency at the University of the Witwatersrand, I developed the artistic project presented in this publication, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, in Johannesburg during February and March 2020. Before I start, I want to thank my colleague Myer Taub, who invited me, and Professor Christo Doherty of ARA, who generously hosted me. I would also like to thank everybody who assisted me during my stay and contributed to my work and this publication: Manola Gayatri Kumarswamy, Samuel Ancer, and the other interviewees; Moira MacMurray, Donald McCallum, Tina Johnson, Shilongane Nkoana, Busisiwe Mahlangu; as well as all the people that helped me in other ways: Zanele Madiba, Zeno Jacobs, Bettina Malcomess; and my host in Nirox, Benji Liebmann. Thank you for your generous contributions and your support!

Introduction

Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees

The title of the project – *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* – alludes to the celebrated photography book *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* (1996) by Thomas Pakenham. In some sense, this project is a counterpoint to Pakenham's book by questioning what is, indeed, remarkable and what is unremarkable, focusing on individual trees. The medium in this project, however, is not photography, but rather performance for video and recorded voice. *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* develops experiences from the artistic research project *Performing with Plants*, funded by the Swedish Research Council and hosted by Stockholm University of the Arts (2018–2019).

Plants and vegetation are receiving increased attention in the context of the current climate crises and the rapid extinction of species. Although, as the expression goes, we are sometimes accused of not seeing the forest for the trees, by focusing on individual trees, this project addresses the contrasting danger: not seeing the trees for the forest. This view does not deny that trees form networks, ecosystems and/or symbiotic relationships, not only with other trees but also with fungi, bacteria and an abundance of micro-organisms; nor that trees are in constant exchange with their environment, as humans are as well. Furthermore, this view recognises the fact that forests, woods, and other significant groupings of trees are necessary to produce effective carbon sinks, cooler and fresher urban air, and to improve flood resistance. Focusing on the individual is also a risky strategy in the context of neoliberal capitalism, where individualism is already exaggerated. Nevertheless, considering trees as individuals can be an important first step towards decolonising our relationship with "nature." As the late Australian environmental philosopher and ecofeminist activist, Val Plumwood indicated, colonial thinking tends to emphasise a marked difference between "us" and "them," rendering all those categorised as "them" as fundamentally alike, stereotypical, and non-individualised.[1] Thus, considering particular, individual trees might serve as a way to help people see trees as life forms, with which we have much in common, despite our undeniable differences.

Rethinking our relationship to those other life forms with whom we share this planet is a central task for artists today. Artistic research is particularly suited to this task because of its capacity to allow and generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. Thus, this project aims to contribute to the growing field of artistic research by developing and sharing some simple artistic practices, and by bringing attention to humans' relationship with trees. Artistically, the project can be situated at the intersection of three discourses: performance art, with its emphasis on embodied presence; video or media art, which values repetition, transformation and critical reflection on technology; and environmental art, with its sensitivity to the possible effects and side effects an artwork can have.

In this new project, I spend time with trees in various locations – remarkable in their own context, remarkably unremarkable, or perhaps simply strange or peculiar – to create video works and video essays. Rather than working with rough time-lapse videos produced over a year, emphasising the seasonal time cycles, as I have done in previous projects, I focus on attentive co-presence during shorter time periods. This project builds on some preliminary experiments that were made in previous work in which I created

1. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature'.

a diary using a rough time-lapse technique for the duration of one day; in one example, visiting the undeniably remarkable 9950-year old spruce tree, Old Tjikko, a clone on Fulufjället in Sweden (together with Camilla Bäckstrand), and, in another, spending a day with a decidedly unremarkable juniper shrub in Utö, Finland. The development of this project is described in a blog,[2] and the videos of trees I have met or visited, including the ones in Johannesburg and its environs, are continually archived on the Research Catalogue.[3]

In scholarly terms, this project could be situated within the emerging field of critical plant studies, which has been linked to "art's return to vegetal life" and to looking at plants in art.[4] Other discussions have focused on plant rights,[5] plant philosophy or plant thinking,[6] plant theory,[7] the language of plants,[8] and queer plants.[9] Currently, there is a "plant turn" in science, philosophy and environmental humanities, accompanied by many popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence, memory and communication.[10] Although not primarily scholarly in its aims, this project wishes to contribute to these discussions with an artistic focus on embodied practice.

In Johannesburg

In South Africa, there seems to be a long history of interest in individual trees, as exemplified by the nomination of so-called champion trees.[11] Since Johannesburg is praised as the largest human-made forest (or, perhaps, arboretum) in the world, what better place to encounter trees? During my relatively brief stay there in February and March 2020, I explored versions of my previous strategies for encountering trees and developed new ones. In addition to standing for a moment with an old oak tree on Galway Road every day, and standing once every hour for a day (between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m.) with a twin-tree of Firethorn Rhus in Nirox Sculpture Park in Krugersdorp, I visited various trees in the parks of Johannesburg, spending approximately fifteen minutes sitting or standing with each of them. By breathing the same air and engaging in trans-corporeal exchange (a term suggested by Stacy Alaimo to emphasise the movement of chemicals between bodies),[12] I tried to increase my understanding of our common participation in "zoe" (a term that Rosi Braidotti prompts us to use instead of "bios," to indicate the commonality of all forms of life).[13] Importantly, I also explored a completely new way of working (new for me), by asking various people I met to introduce me to a tree that is important to them. These people performed with their chosen trees in various ways, and I also recorded small interviews where they recounted their reasons for choosing that particular tree. The selection of people is limited to those with whom I have come into contact at or through the University of the Witwatersrand, and who had time to spare. Some meetings had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out during my visit and forced me to abandon my work in Johannesburg and return to Helsinki, Finland. The trees included in this publication are therefore not in any way representative of the huge variety of trees, both indigenous and exotic, that grow in Johannesburg and its environs. These trees form a rather arbitrary selection of meetings, which, like all meetings, happen due to all kinds of accidental occurrences and fortuitous coincidences. Sadly, many planned meetings never

2. https://meetingswithtrees.com

3. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/761327

4. Gibson and Brits, *Covert Plants*; Gibson, *The Plant Contract*; Aloi, *Why Look at Plants?*

5. Hall, *Plants as Persons*.

6. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*; Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being*; Coccia, *The Life of Plants*.

7. Nealon, *Plant Theory*. Myers, 'From the Anthropocene to the Planthroposcene'.

8. Vieira, Gagliano, and Ryan, *The Green Thread*; Kranz, Schwan, and Wittrock, *Floriographie*; Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira, *The Language of Plants*.

9. Sandilands, 'Fear of a Queer Plant?'; Nikolić and Radulovic, 'Aesthetics of Inhuman Touch'.

10. Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*; Mancuso et al., *Brilliant Green*; Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*; Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows*; Gagliano, *Thus Spoke the Plant*.

11. Esterhuyse, Breitenboch, Söhnwe and Van der Merwe, *Remarkable Trees of South Africa*, 51–60.

12. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.

13. Braidotti, 'Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism'.

took place due to the sudden interruption of my visit. Quite a few meetings did happen, however, and they are documented in the following text.

This publication comprises three sections. The first, this introduction, presents the project, its background, some theoretical discussions related to the personhood of plants and to the notion of vegetal democracy, as well as a brief overview of my methods. The second section, entitled *The Trees*, includes five chapters presenting all the trees I purposely encountered with still images from the videos and notes, or transcripts of the interviews. The third section, titled, somewhat erroneously, *Concluding Remarks*, includes some reflections on the status of the material presented, as well as on decolonising our relationship to nature. The first and last sections are text-based and more academic in style, while the middle section, which contains the presentation of the trees and the stories or notes related to them, is more varied in style, and relies heavily on visual information. The notes include transcripts of informal talks and even some literary contributions, with still images from the videos playing a significant role. Those readers who are eager to meet the trees could skip the introduction and focus on the second section: the images. Those readers who are interested in understanding the context and motivation for these explorations, and the reflections they have generated, could focus on the introduction and the concluding remarks, and just skim the middle section with the images of the actual meetings with the trees.

Background

Historically, there is no lack of artistic engagement with trees and plants, from vegetally-inspired music or ornamentation on textiles, pottery and architecture, to paintings, poems and science fiction stories featuring plants. Living plants are used as material in diverse practices like garden design, sonification, floral arrangements and contemporary bio art. With the developments in plant science and the post-humanities, however, artists, artist-researchers and scholars are looking at plants in new ways. The growing interest in plant studies (as a further development of the burgeoning sector of animal studies and post-humanist thinking, to some extent) is also influencing artistic research. I have described some of these discussions elsewhere.[14] Here, I briefly describe the background to my personal interest in plants and especially trees, which developed from my interest in space, place and landscape.

14. Arlander, 'Performing with Plants'.

Performing Landscape

The research project I began developing after completing my doctoral work on performance as space is called *Performing Landscape*, which is described in a collection of texts, titled *Performing Landscape: Notes on Site-specific Work and Artistic Research*[15] (2012). The text deals with space and place, and has a shift in emphasis from theatre to performance, and from theatre research to the study of contemporary art. At that time, I formulated my concerns as follows:

15. https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/37613

> The question "how to perform landscape" can be understood as twofold: How can you perform landscape? How can you perform (and represent) landscape for somebody else, some other time or somewhere else? I started by asking how to perform landscape without "stealing the show," without turning the landscape into a backdrop for characters or a story? Today the most relevant question is: How is a performance created in its documentation? That question is related to different time conceptions, since I realised that in performing landscape, I am actually mostly displaying time.[16]

16. Arlander, *Performing Landscape*, 9.

Over the years, I used a very general question – "how to perform landscape today?" – as my starting point, and came to understand performing landscape in a performative sense rather than in terms of representing or staging. Presentations at the PSI (Performance Studies International) conferences and the Performance as Research Working Group meetings during the IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) conferences were especially important in keeping the project alive.[17] This is despite the fact that I moved away from performing arts, and related my work to the traditions of performance art, video art and environmental art, exploring the borderlands between them. In terms of artworks, my main focus was a collection of video works: a series of twelve one-year projects, called *Animal Years*, recorded on Harakka Island in Helsinki, Finland, and based on the Chinese calendar and its twelve-year cycle, with each year named after a specific animal. I began this series in the Year of the Horse (2002) and finished in the Year of the Horse (2014). The key question explored in this series was how to perform landscape today. Plants or trees were not of any particular concern.

17. Arlander, *Performing Landscape*, 10.

The main purpose of the work was to bring attention to changes in the landscape caused by the shifting seasons, weather and climate, and to focus on the environment and document the changes taking place. What might seem like a static landscape is continually changing. By performing a "still-act" or a simple action in front of a video camera, returning to the same spot every time, I direct attention to the events taking place in the landscape, which are then brought to the forefront. By repeating the performance during an extended time period, a year in this case, and then concentrating the material via the editing process, the changes become visible. With an increased awareness of climate change, my aim was to produce "souvenirs" of the changes in the landscape on the northern coast of the Baltic Sea at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Making the passing of time visible was initially only a side effect of the work. Cyclical planetary time, based on the movement of the earth around the sun, and the earth around its own axis, thereby generating seasonal changes, was combined in a cyclic video loop format within an installation context. This format was new to me, coming from a performing arts background.[18]

18. For a discussion on time in the series, see Arlander, 'Performing Landscape for Years'.

Performances were recorded using a camera on a tripod, repeated approximately once a week for a year, in the same place, with roughly the same framing of the image. The performances were then edited to form short videos or multi-channel installations, to show time passing in the landscape. Repetition generates video clips with variations

that can be combined chronologically. Seasonal changes, shifting weather conditions, and various accidental occurrences thus create the "action" within an otherwise static set-up. Every year I chose a new site, or several new sites, on that same island to visit repeatedly, searching for a novel perspective on the landscape, a fresh aspect of the environment, and a new kind of relationship between the human body and the surroundings. The resultant series was not designed as a research project, however, although most of the works have served as data or material for research articles.

Only when exploring variations in the landscape, did I realise that vegetation and trees, in particular, formed an important and often constitutive part of the environment I was recording. My first reflections on this realisation were published as an article in 2010 as 'Performing with Trees: Landscape and Artistic Research'.[19] Those reflections later formed the basis for the artistic research project *Performing with Plants*.

19. Arlander, 'Performing with Trees'.

Performing with Plants

Performing with Plants[20] was a research project funded by the Kone Foundation at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2017, and by the Committee for Artistic Research of the Swedish Research Council, hosted by Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH) from 2018 to 2019. On the website of SKH, the goal and purpose of the project were succinctly described as follows:

20. https://www.uniarts.se/english/research-and-development-work/research-projects/performing-with-plants

> Performing with plants, especially with trees, is an artistic research project aiming to investigate the question "how to perform landscape today?" which I have worked with for several years. The question is not rhetorical; our relationship to the environment has changed drastically and demands new approaches. A post-humanist perspective prompts us to rethink the notion of landscape, and to realize that the surrounding world consists of creatures, life forms and material phenomena with differing degrees of volition, needs and agency. What forms of performing landscape could be relevant in this situation? One possibility is to approach individual elements, like singular trees, and explore what could be done together with them, for instance performing for camera together. The main aim of the project is to explore such possibilities in practice.
>
> The project strives to explore whether collaborating with trees and other plants could be one way of entering in dialogue with our surroundings that resonates with a post-humanist and new-materialist view on the environment. By focusing on individual elements in the landscape, especially plants – which we chemically have a symbiotic relationship with, while they produce the oxygen we use, and we produce the carbon dioxide they need – more sensitive and ecologically sustainable modes of performing can hopefully be developed. And these methods, artworks and events can perhaps serve as inspiration and provocation leading to revised ways of understanding and experiencing our surrounding world.

Further, the main research questions were summarised in the following way:

> An overarching research task is: How to perform landscape today by collaborating with trees and other plants, with an awareness of the insights generated by post-humanist and new-materialist research? The most important questions to be explored are:
>
> 1) How can I collaborate with nonhuman entities like plants, trees or bushes?
>
> 2) How can I further develop experiences and techniques from previous attempts at performing landscape?
>
> 3) How can I create actions with plants, in which humans can be invited to participate?

Additionally, the practical realisation of the project was briefly described:

> The main working method consists in making documented artistic experiments, developed on the basis of previous experiences in performing landscape and in reflecting on them in relation to some theoretical notions. The three main modes of expression to be used in the artistic exploration are: 1) performances for camera repeated with the same tree and edited into video works, 2) co-performances with visitors recorded on video, edited and projected back onto the site in a live performance and 3) interactive experiments with talking trees, or a lecture performance with voice-over text, live action and a monologue combined with projections.
>
> On the basis of these experiments poetic instructions or event scores will be written, to be realised or simply contemplated, as an updated form of a Fluxus technique. A central dimension of the project is thus to distil and articulate methods for co-performing with plants and trees that are possible to apply as a poetic and critical practice.

In the research outline, I summarise the purpose of the project in a slightly different way:

> Rethinking our relationship to the environment is a central task for artists today. Artistic research can contribute through its capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. This project participates in the new materialist post-humanist discussion by way of a) developing artistic practices and producing art works that can critically question existing conventions and habits in our relationship to the environment and b) by theoretically reflecting, based on practical exploration, what it means to collaborate with plants and especially trees. The importance of the project rests ultimately on the importance of the plants themselves – they are producing the preconditions for life on the planet in its current oxygen-based form.

The project and its various activities are archived on a timeline[21] in the international Research Catalogue for artistic research. The two main outputs are listed as video works and peer-reviewed scholarly articles.[22] Most of the articles, openly available online, use particular works created during the project as examples, while discussing topics related to the themes of the journal issue in which they are published, rather than describing the project as such. This is evident in their titles: 'Resting with Pines in Nida: Attempts at Performing with Plants',[23] 'Performing with Trees and the Tide: A Diffractive Reading',[24] 'Behind the Back of Linnaeus',[25] and 'Performing with Plants in the Ob-scene Anthropocene'.[26] However, the main artistic output, a picture book comprised of video stills that presents the main works performed with trees in Stockholm, is a material object and does not exist in digital form.[27]

As a result of the *Performing with Plants* project, I realised, among other things, that I should focus on trees, rather than plants in general. Additionally, I sought to explore other ways of meeting trees instead of the year-long time-lapse videos, which tend to emphasise seasonal changes and time passing, rather than encounters with the specific trees. One of the conceptual and ethical problems that emerged during the project is the question of the individuality of trees. I highlighted this issue in my last project presentation in Stockholm before leaving for Johannesburg. Returning to that presentation here creates some context for the rather radical shift in my approach, from visiting one tree approximately three times a week for a year in Stockholm during the Year of the Pig (9.1.2019–15.1.2020) – resulting in the video work *Year of the Pig with a Tatarian Maple*[28] – to recording brief encounters with new trees almost every week in Johannesburg. Should we understand trees as individuals or even persons of a kind, and if so, how could we best encounter them? This question forms part of the theoretical background for my explorations in Johannesburg, even though I did not engage with it there directly.

21. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551

22. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/709778

23. https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/232

24. https://wiki.aalto.fi/download/attachments/172982823/Annette_Arlander.pdf

25. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/470496/470497

26. https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/article/view/120411

27. Arlander, *Att uppträda med träd*.

28. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=783427

Plants as Persons

In his book *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2011), Matthew Hall investigates the human relationship to plants in various philosophical and spiritual traditions. He examines "the marginalization of plants using the themes of radical separation, zoocentrism (an animal-centred outlook), exclusion, and hierarchical value ordering" and argues "that these notions predominate in Western discussions of plant ontology."[29] Hall's analysis shows how "[i]n order to maintain hierarchical ordering, the continuity of life has been ignored in favour of constructing sharp discontinuities between humans, plants, and animals."[30] Further, he notes that "shared characteristics such as life and growth have been rejected in order to focus on the gross differences."[31]

Preferring to understand *plants as persons*, Hall claims that "to place plants in the ontological category of persons is neither fanciful nor deluded."[32] For Hall, "the inclusion of plants in relationships of care is based upon close observation of plant life history and the recognition of shared attributes between all beings."[33] He attempts "a deliberate structuring of relationships in a heterarchy rather than a hierarchy," and a "recognition

29. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 4.

30. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 157.

31. Ibid.

32. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 11.

33. Ibid.

of connectedness in the face of alterity," which "contrasts sharply with what could be termed a Western ethic of exclusion."[34]

Further, Hall "argues for recognizing plants as subjects deserving of respect as other-than-human persons," and "advocates including plants within human ethical awareness."[35] He reminds us that an ethic constitutes an ideal of human behaviour, rather than a description of it. He writes: "In an ecological context, moral action is enacted respect and responsibility for the well-being of the others with whom we share the Earth."[36] Hall insists that

> the recognition of plants as autonomous, perceptive, intelligent beings must filter into our dealings with the plant world. Maintaining purely instrumental relationships with plants no longer fits the evidence that we have of plant attributes, characteristics, and life histories – and the interconnectedness of life on Earth.[37]

Moreover, "in a biosphere dominated by plants... turning toward the other-than-human cannot be at the implicit exclusion of plants from the class of morally considerable beings."[38]

Additionally, Hall notes that "whatever the current scientific debates, the intellectual basis for treatments of plant life as inert, vacant, raw materials is demonstrably false" and thus "the continued denial of plant autonomy and the exclusion of plants from human moral consideration is no longer appropriate."[39] The questions he then poses are: "What shape should human-plant ethics take? How can we move from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care? How can plants be incorporated into dialogical relationships?"[40] This last question is the core problem in *performing with plants*.

Hall recommends "the recognition of plants as other-than-human persons," as "a powerful way of incorporating plants within social and moral relationships of care and nurturing. Yet, unlike in the animal rights theory," he notes, "persons are not exempt from use."[41] We cannot avoid eating plants. "Uncomfortable or not, there is no dualistic separation of personhood and use," he writes. "Human persons must act harmfully toward plant persons in order to live and the necessary harm done to plant and animal persons is accepted, ritualized and celebrated as a fact of being alive."[42] This action can be done with "the conviction to only harm plant persons when necessary and to encourage the growth of plants where possible."[43]

Hall further maintains that "there are several key areas where an ethic of dialogical respect can begin to focus... and three broad areas can easily be identified."[44] The first concerns "lessening the wastage of plant lives – that is, treating plant lives as nothing. Wasting plant products, particularly paper and food, drives unnecessary harm to plants."[45] The second area relates to "the sheer (predominantly Western) overconsumption of plant products," which is an "identifiable threat to plant well-being."[46] A third cause of "harm to individual plants, plant species, and plant habitats is the unnecessary, unthinking use of plants" like "the use of plants to feed massive numbers of animals for the world's wealthiest nations to consume," he adds.[47]

34. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 11.

35. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 157.

36. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 13.

37. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 13.

38. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 13–14.

39. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 156.

40. Ibid.

41. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 161.

42. Ibid.

43. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 161.

44. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 163.

45. Ibid.

46. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 164.

47. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 165.

"Understanding that plants are active, self-directed, even intelligent Beings," Hall observes, "must be realized through working closely with plants in collaborative projects of mutual benefit. Working closely with individual plant persons also has the potential to shift the view of nature as an organic, homogenized whole – which... contributes to the backgrounding of nature."[48] The "recognition of plants as persons" Hall asserts, "puts forward the view that nature is a communion of subjective, collaborative beings that organize and experience their own lives."[49]

Seen as a nonhuman person in this manner, the Tatarian maple in Stockholm and my repeated performances with it, and with pine trees during the previous year, could be understood as an attempt at contact, or a gesture of respect, even if not directly a collaborative project of mutual benefit, particularly not for the maple. In fact, I used the tree as my support while sitting on it, like a hammock. It could be said that the old maple served rather as a setting for my performance, and not as a co-performer or collaborator. Regarding a tree one repeatedly visits for a long time as a person to enter into a temporary dialogical relationship with makes sense, although this kind of approach might not be as easy with other types of vegetation. Further, what about the trees only briefly encountered and recorded? I did not visit most of the trees I met in Johannesburg repeatedly but spent only a short moment with them. Did I treat them as persons? Not really. However, I did consider them as individuals, not only representatives of their species, but as specific beings growing in particular circumstances in a specific manner, and thus with a history of their own.

48. Hall, *Plants as Persons*, 169.

49. Ibid.

Persons as Plants

The idea of regarding plants as persons could be criticised as a misplaced understanding of plants' mode of being. The Aristotelian distinction of the vegetal (nutritive), animal (sensible) and human (rational) soul, the medieval "Great Chain of Being" with rocks at the bottom and humans at the top (below angels and God), as well as the division of the world into mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms (by the Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus in 1735), all influence our understanding of trees, and our making of performances. In his study *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013), philosopher Michael Marder offers a critique of this legacy, following Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics, emphasising the dispersed life of plants, and their divisibility rather than their individuality. For Marder, "every consideration of a post-foundational, post-metaphysical ethics and politics worthy of its name must admit the contributions of vegetal life to... the non-essentialized mode of 'living with'."[50] Instead of extending personhood to plants, Marder challenges humans to recognise the planthood in themselves.

According to Marder, inherent divisibility and participation are paramount in the life of plants; 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.[51] He introduces the notion of "vegetal democracy," a principle that concerns all species without exception. For Marder, "the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an onto-political

50. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 53.

51. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 69.

effect of plant-soul," which must "eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority."[52]

Notably, Marder stresses that thinking is not the sole privilege of the human subject, and he tries to formulate a post-metaphysical way of thinking by focusing on "the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought, which is both an idealizing and an idealized permutation of plant-thinking."[53] What he calls the "non-conscious intentionality of vegetal life" could be understood as an "essentialism-free way of thinking that is fluid, receptive, dispersed, non-oppositional, non-representational, immanent, and material-practical, provided that these descriptors are extracted from their metaphysical context."[54] Thinking like a plant means to think without adhering to formal logic and therefore, in some sense, not to think. A human being who thinks like a plant becomes a plant since the destruction of classical *logos* dismantles the thing that distinguishes us from other living beings, Marder observes. He responds to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's suggestion to follow the plants by engaging in irreverent plant-thinking, on the path of becoming-plant.[55]

Marder's realisation that thinking is not the sole privilege of the human subject leads him to introduce the notion "it thinks": "In place of the Kantian transcendental synthesis of *I think* that supposedly accompanies all my representations, plant-thinking posits *it think*s, a much more impersonal, non-subjective, and non-anthropomorphic agency."[56] The vegetal "it thinks," which might mean, for instance, a tree that thinks, refers to a much more undecided subject as well. "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.[57] Apart from "altering the form of thought (which becomes inseparable from its opposite, the non-thought)" as well as "changing its content" (which includes contradictions), such "'non-identical thinking' indicates freedom from the substantive and self-enclosed identity of the thinkers themselves."[58] Or, to state it plainly: "Plant-thinking starts with the explosion of identity."[59]

Marder then attempts to formulate the lived conditions for plant-thinking and notes that it happens initially "*when* the presumed self-identity of 'subjects' and 'objects' that populate a given milieu recedes, allowing a rhizomatic assemblage to surge up to the foreground, to be activated by sharing difference among its various nodes,"[60] and second, "*where* the spacings and connections, communication lines and gaps between the participants in this assemblage prevail over what is delimited within them."[61] This means that, for Marder, thinking, including the functioning of the brain, resembles rhizomatic grass: "When *it think*s, it does so non-hierarchically and, like the growing grass, keeps close to the ground, to existence, to the immanence of what is 'here below'."[62] Moreover, this formulation defines the thinker as well: "At the core of the subject who proclaims: 'I think', lies the subjectless vegetal *it think*s, at once shoring up and destabilizing the thinking of this 'I'."[63] Thus, instead of emphasising the personhood of plants, we should, following Marder, rather look at the plant-like base of our own personhood.

52. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 53.

53. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 152.

54. Ibid.

55. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 165.

56. Ibid.

57. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 169.

58. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 165.

59. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 43.

60. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 169.

61. Ibid.

62. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 169.

63. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 170.

Personhood and Legal Persons

In his response to Marder's critique of extending personhood to plants,[64] Hall underlines that there are several ways of understanding personhood, not all of them projecting human attributes onto plants. One example is provided by Thomas Puleo, who, in his text 'Incorporating Nonhuman Subjectivity into World Society: The Case of Extending Personhood to Plants' (2019) begins by severing the ties between "person" and "human" or subjectivity and humanity. Puleo notes that the English word "person" "derives from the Latin *persona*, which denoted a mask worn by an actor on stage" referring "not to a human being but to an inanimate object."[65] Despite this, Puleo is nevertheless "attributing to plants all of his six (predetermined) characteristics of personhood (agency, sentience, perception, consciousness, communicability and contractibility)," Hall observes.[66] Unlike Puleo, Hall propagates a relational approach to personhood, where "the basic relational nature of the self means that moral worth is not to be found in individual capacities or in the membership of a species, but within relationships."[67]

Hall would not "contest the fact that plants have radical morphological differences with humans," and seen "[a]gainst the backdrop of a human hyper-separation from nature founded on hierarchical ontological dualisms... their 'absolute otherness' is manifestly apparent."[68] He disagrees, however, with Marder's attempt to emphasise the radical alterity of plant beings, and rejects the idea "that better relationships will come through emphasising and deepening our appreciation of such otherness."[69] Rather, Hall "seeks affinity with plants and deliberately takes a relational, inclusive stance, which emphasises our connections," inspired by indigenous animist cultures, which he discusses at length, as well as Jain and Buddhist traditions.[70]

Hall asserts that "it is more appropriate in our 'manner of speaking' to accord plants moral status, to relate to them as persons, than to treat them as an inexhaustible supply of 'raw materials' here only for human ends."[71] His view is partly based on Erazim Kohák's thoughts on "philosophical ecology," and the idea that "manners of speaking" are "modes of interacting with reality" and can "render our world meaningful and guide our actions therein."[72] Humans have, for example, a choice between "treating trees as raw materials or treating them with respect."[73] In this view, personhood is related to kinship or mutuality and sharing. For Hall, "personhood emerges from 'talking with' the trees, not talking for them."[74] Here, talking means "a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree – rather than 'speaking' one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand."[75] Interestingly for the project at hand, where I have also experimented with addressing trees in writing, this "talking with" rather involves "attentiveness to variances and invariances in behaviour and response of things in states of relatedness" as well as getting to know the trees "as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them."[76] Evidently, there are differences between living together with trees, spending time with them repeatedly, and meeting them only briefly. Admittedly, however, most of my meetings with trees in Johannesburg were brief and did not involve anything that could be called "talking with" the trees I met.

64. Marder, 'Is It Ethical to Eat Plants?', 37 (footnote 5).

65. Puleo, 'Incorporating Nonhuman Subjectivity into World Society', 212.

66. Puleo, 'Incorporating Nonhuman Subjectivity into World Society', quoted in Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 3.

67. Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 3.

68. Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 9.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 12.

72. Kohák, 'Speaking to Trees', 385, quoted in Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 12.

73. Ibid.

74. Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 12.

75. Bird-David, '"Animism" Revisited', 77, quoted in Hall, 'In Defence of Plant Personhood', 6.

76. Ibid.

The problem of personhood can also be viewed in legal, rather than anthropological or philosophical terms. In 'Nature as a Legal Person',[77] Dinah Shelton provides an overview of various political attempts at granting legal personality to animals, specific ecosystems such as rivers, or even nature as a whole, in order to ensure the possibility of defending their rights in court. Shelton also discusses some of the limitations of this approach, depending on who is appointed "guardian" or representative of the legal person, how the borders of the ecosystem that is declared a person are defined, the relationship between indigenous rights and environmental rights, and the right to "sue," as well as difficulties in ascertaining who exactly is responsible for the restorative actions to be carried out.[78] The idea of conceptualising environmental protection as a human rights issue could in itself be seen as a limitation, perhaps based more on expediency in a critical situation of imminent exploitation, degradation or disaster, rather than an understanding of humans as being an integral part of the planet, the biosphere and nature. This point brings us back to the idea of vegetal democracy.

77. Shelton, 'Nature as a Legal Person'.

78. Shelton, 'Nature as a Legal Person', 10–11.

Vegetal Democracy and Performance

In their foreword to Marder's study of plant-thinking, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala note how, in understanding plants as a "non-totalizing assemblage of multiplicities, an inherently political space of convivialities," and in speaking of "vegetal democracy," Marder is not that far from the environmental political activities taking place in some countries in South America.[79] Ecuador, for instance, has declared nature as a legal person, and Bolivia has given constitutional protection to ecosystems,[80] although Marder does not mention them. Marder's idea of vegetal democracy is provocative and interesting for performance as research too, which tends to work with hierarchies and priorities, as I have previously discussed in the Performance as Research Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR).[81] In the context of the working group, I wondered whether the idea of vegetal democracy could be of help when developing methods for performing with plants, or for performance as research more generally.

Marder stresses the importance of understanding vegetal life in aiding our understanding of what it means to "live with" other beings. Analysing historical attempts to describe the plant soul (in a profane meaning of the term), beginning with the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, Marder notes how "the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with."[82] According to this thinking, "all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and are alive in the most basic sense insofar as they neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible below the death masks of their identities."[83] For Marder, the "shared divisibility of all living beings, first honed in the acts of the vegetal soul, pertains to the workings of the soul in general," and for "the psyche to live it must receive guidance from the vegetal principle of divisibility, constantly becoming other to itself; in other words, it must be temporal through and through."[84] This could, of course, be understood in a more biological sense as well, considering how most multicellular organisms are engaged in various symbiotic relationships.

79. Vattimo and Zabala, 'Foreword', xv.

80. Shelton, 'Nature as a Legal Person', 6.

81. See Arlander and Kumarswamy, *Performance as Research and Democracy*.

82. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 51.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

Psychic principles have already featured as analogous to political power relations in Plato, in the form of metaphysical justifications for a fixed distribution of power, Marder notes, Plato's *Republic*, being a case in point. In that text, desire, or the appetitive soul, is combined with the workers, while courage, or the spirited part of the soul, is linked with the guardians and thinking, or the rational soul is combined with the philosopher-kings. Rather than supporting such a division, Marder is "adopting Plato's psycho-politics rid of its hierarchical component" and proposing the term "vegetal democracy" to designate "the potential political effects of plant-soul."[85]

For Marder, the plant soul is "consonant with life's hospitality" and stands for what is common and inclusive, and not as a "naturalized foundation for actual and ideal democratic regimes" between autonomous individuals, but as a more basic principle of sharing.[86] The generosity of the plant-soul, "giving itself without reserve to everything and everyone that lives, transcribes vegetal democracy into an ethical politics," he writes, "free of any expectations of returns from the other."[87] Moreover, vegetal democracy brings together all "growing things," because "[l]ike plants, animals and humans too are 'growing things,' even if in addition to the growth of hair, nails, claws, fur, or feathers, they exhibit other kinds of growth that are experiential, intellectual and so on."[88] This means that vegetal democracy concerns all species without exception.[89]

What vegetal democracy could mean in practice, Marder does not really discuss. Some hints can be obtained from the idea of a plant as a collective being, its body "a non-totalizing assemblage of multiplicities." However, the body politics of vegetal democracy should be, according to Marder, clearly distinguished from any organic models, and the idea of "the organism whose parts – the organs – are subservient to the demands of the whole."[90] Two dangers are to be avoided by "post-metaphysical vegetal thought," namely projecting "animal and human constitutions onto plants" and projecting "contrived organicity of nature as a living whole, onto the *socium*," Marder notes.[91]

"To live is to be superficial and dis-organized: to exist outside the totality of an organism: to be a plant," Marder asserts.[92] The plant is not an organism consisting of organs; its parts transcend the distinction between "part" and "whole"; they are simultaneously members of a plant and independent entities in their own right, constituting a provisional unity of multiplicities. The plant is a collective being, a loose community, which is not interlaced by an inner essence.[93] The plant, whose forms and functions are fluid, is a mode of dis-organisation, "a pure multiplicity of immanence."[94] The leaf is not an organ of a larger whole or a derivation from the original stem-root structure, but "an infinitely iterable and radically egalitarian building block of the tree," because it is simultaneously "the source, the product, and the minute reproduction of vegetal being, from which it may at any time fall away."[95]

The plant is overturning the difference in value between copies versus originals in veritable anarchy, Marder notes, since it maintains conceptual horizontality even in the verticality of a tree. In their interpenetration, plant life and the vegetal inheritance of human existence shake up the metaphysical distinction between sameness and otherness.[96] This emphasis on copies has some relevance for performance, which only

85. Ibid.

86. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 52.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 51–52.

90. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 85.

91. Ibid.

92. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 84.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 84–85.

96. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 85.

in terms of rigorous or "orthodox" performance art tends to stress the originality and uniqueness of an action and mostly relies on repetition in some form or another. I do as well, even in my once-off video performances with trees.

While analysing their relationship to the environment, Marder observes that plants do not seem to be obliged to separate themselves from their surroundings, or to negate their connection to a place, in order to fully become themselves through this oppositional stance, like other types of subjectivity. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, in order to exist, a vegetal being must "remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows."[97] A plant's relationship to the elements is not domineering but receptive, as when a flower or leaf turn their widest surfaces to the sun, or the way the root imbibes everything, whether nutrients or poisonous substances, from the soil into which it burrows, Marder adds.[98] This integral relationship with the place or site, with the surroundings, environment and circumstances, as well as the moment in time, and the broader context, is relevant for performances and performance as research. Further, this relationship becomes exceedingly evident when working with trees.

Let us return to the two conditions for plant-thinking that Marder proposes: "*when* the presumed self-identity of 'subjects' and 'objects' that populate a given milieu recedes, allowing a rhizomatic assemblage to surge up to the foreground,"[99] and "*where* the spacings and connections, communication lines and gaps between the participants in this assemblage prevail over what is delimited within them."[100] How could these conditions be understood in terms of performance? Attempting to articulate the various dependencies and the material-discursive practices involved in the creation of a performance – especially the relationships between the various agents included in the milieu, the "when and where" a performance takes place – would foster a more inclusive understanding of performance as research. Besides an integral relationship with the site, ideas like divisibility and participation, assemblage and connection make sense in many types of performances, whether in terms of a collaborative ensemble working collectively with their audience, trying to avoid the traditional hierarchies of stage production, or a small assemblage of a camera, a tripod, a human body, and a tree, like in my practice. The necessity of including an assistant to guard the camera on the tripod in Johannesburg can serve as an example of the subtle and sometimes overt influence of context and site on performance practices, and also of the importance of relationships in the most "solitary" and seemingly independent of endeavours.

What could be drawn out of these thoughts on plant-thinking or vegetal democracy to help develop the methodology of performance as research? To think of rhizomatic assemblages instead of self-identical subjects makes sense in many types of performances. To think of the sites of connections and gaps between the participants, rather than the participants themselves as self-enclosed entities, is relatively easy to understand through the legacy of theatrical traditions that emphasise ensemble. It is not what you do, but how your colleagues respond to your action, that produces the character on stage. Similarly, it is not what happens in the image, but how the action in the image is connected to the following one, that creates the rhythm in my time-lapse videos.

97. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 69.

98. Ibid.

99. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 169.

100. Ibid.

Articulating relationships and connections between performers or other human contributors in a performance is fairly straightforward in conventional forms of performance, where the division of labour and the hierarchies of production are supported by the ethos of the whole being more than the parts. To extend this understanding beyond thinking in terms of the whole and the parts, to something closer to "vegetal democracy" where all those involved are both members and independent entities in their own right, constituting a provisional unity of multiplicities, is more challenging. How could such a "non-totalizing assemblage of multiplicities, an inherently political space of convivialities"[101] be construed, avoiding the often exaggerated and sometimes exclusionary community-building activities that many theatre practitioners engage in? A further problem is how to extend an understanding of such a space to include the various other-than human contributors, as well as the material-discursive practices and conditions for action that we tend to neglect while focusing on the humans.

A productive starting point is to articulate the relationship to "an outside," a site and context, a system, an environment, a milieu, the "when and where" something takes place, rather than focusing on "who" is doing something, as is easily done in performance. This process can seem uninteresting or difficult in many performance practices, which are so focused on human beings, and where the performer or a character is foregrounded and deliberately "taken out" of their context. This is evident even in my practice with trees, where the aim is quite the opposite. For example, although I mostly try to downplay the foregrounding of the human figure when performing with trees – like sitting or standing with my back to the camera to avoid the human face catching the viewer's attention, or being immobile, in order to emphasise other moving elements in the image – the human figure almost always remains the main focus.

Besides artistic choices involved in the actual practice, to attend to the contextual requirements, assumptions and expectations, and also the possible side effects, and to deliberately articulate them when discussing performance projects, may help develop a more inclusive, systemic understanding of performance as research as a methodology. Articulating such contextual elements and possible effects properly is challenging. When focusing on meetings with remarkable and unremarkable trees in Johannesburg, I was interested in the particular trees I encountered and how to create moving images with them. And, I was less interested in their living conditions or the systems of their maintenance, or whether they will be felled and replaced with trees of the same exotic species, or replaced by indigenous tree species, or other topics debated. However, I would, probably be expected to comment on or contribute to such debates, and was at least supposed to know about them and understand them to some extent. Since my knowledge and understanding were too superficial for adding anything relevant to the debate, I found it difficult to incorporate those topics into my practice, including in this text.

Understandably, some contextual knowledge is necessary when creating performances because there is no way for a performance not to contribute to a

101. Vattimo and Zabala, 'Foreword', xv.

political debate. For those who imagine that trees would somehow be exempt from discussions concerning decolonial strategies, for instance, Johannesburg is a good place to start learning. Johannesburg is a place where trees are historically associated with affluent areas, and many species of trees such as jacarandas, oaks or plane trees carry a substantial colonial legacy.[102] On arrival, I expected to learn more about the role of the trees in the city, both in a symbolic sense and in their practical impact on urban living conditions. However, I quickly realised the knowledge I could gain as an outsider in such a short time was too limited for me to be able to contribute to the discussion in a deliberate and constructive manner. Thus, my contributions to ongoing debates are more or less unintentional, and I hope that they do not contradict the aims of those who work for environmental improvement and environmental justice in the city.

102. See, for example, 'Growing Trees in Joburg'.

A Few Words on Method

In the social sciences, as in science, "method" is key, and one often distinguishes between methods for gathering data and those for analysing data. In PAR or PaR, performance as research or practice as research in performance, and in other methodologies that use artistic practices as methods, these distinctions are not as clearly defined. Nevertheless, here I focus on methods for gathering data, and for creating material. How to analyse the material or what to do with it is a later consideration. One particularity of my practice is that I am continuously revealing my method of working by documenting my performances online. Exposing the working process, with the help of still images and notes, thus becomes part of my research method.

When I expose my working process, I reveal my method. But what is my method? On a general level, I use repetition to produce variation, keeping some things as fixed as possible in order to highlight the changes. I perform for a video camera on a tripod, recording images in "real life," not in a studio or on stage. By placing the camera on a tripod, I can work on my own, without a camera person, and without a performer, switching between the roles in front of and behind the camera. The images remain static, however, and often seem staged when compared to moving images in film. The videos, therefore, resemble photography and, when displayed, they look like still images.

I use this method to generate material, but, unlike in the process of devising a performance, when selecting and editing the material, I do not only choose the interesting moments. Instead, I use all the images in the order in which they were created, excluding only the beginning and the end of each clip, or my entering and exiting the image. By choosing (1) a site, for example, a tree in a park, (2) my position or action in relation to that tree, (3) the position of the camera, including the distance, the angle, and the framing of the image, as well as (4) the duration of my visit and a schedule for the repetition, I create a system, a task, some rules that I can follow and see what happens. The initial framing, the visual composition is important. It is like

creating a temporary stage with a designated spectator position for the camera, that has to be recreated every time. The schedule or the choice of temporal structure is also essential because it limits the alternative temporal compositions that can be made by editing. I can perform the action only once, for a longer time – about twenty minutes, which is the maximum time my camera can record video at a time. Alternatively, I can repeat the action every hour for a day, or once a week for a year, as I used to do in my previous projects. The variations generated are quite distinct. The images recorded for twenty minutes in "real-time" resemble photography the most. In an image repeated weekly for a year, the seasonal changes dominate, while repeating an image for a day or a day and night emphasises the changes in light. One of my primary methods has been to make rough time-lapse videos, where small shifts in framing and positioning are visible, and which show the changes taking place in the environment. The simple still-acts – videos that look almost like still-images, where I perform with a tree only once – I have mostly made when travelling. Most of my performances with trees in Johannesburg belong to this category.

A novel method for my work that I have been developing lately is writing letters to trees. Occasionally, when making a time-lapse video for a day, I have made notes of each session and recorded them as a voice-over, like field notes or a journal. As an experiment, after visiting a pine tree for the whole of 2018, I wrote a text in the form of a letter and added it as a voice-over to the video. This became the starting point for a new practice of writing letters to trees. The following step was to write a letter to the tree while sitting next to the tree, recording the act of writing with the video camera, or "performing writing for camera." I could decide later whether a text written next to a tree will be recorded and added to the video as a voice-over. I tried this kind of writing for the first time with an old olive tree in Ulldecona in Catalonia in December 2019. The small experiments made during my visit to Nirox, near Johannesburg, called *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)*[103] and *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)*,[104] are the first examples of this novel method; the text written during the performance for camera is recorded and added as a voice-over to an abbreviated version of the video.

As is evident in the examples above, "method" in this context, firstly means a method for art-making or a manner of generating material for artworks. However, the same material can also serve as material for articles. Generally, I am more concerned with methods of gathering data than with methods for analysing it. Of course, I have methods for editing the video material, and for installing and screening and combining the completed video works. Perhaps, in some way, I also have methods for reflecting on the works and writing about them, albeit not as clearly articulated as the ones for producing material.

The relationship between my research questions and methods is also rather vague, in contrast to what is usually expected to be the case in research. Although I might start with the question of "how to perform with trees in a respectful manner" I am not really developing new methods in order to best answer that question. Rather, I use and adapt the methods of my previous practice to create artworks, and then reflect on my experiences afterwards in relation to that question. Or, I relate the problems

103. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813

104. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675

encountered while working to theoretical ideas that somehow clarify or address the research question. I may also use my artworks as examples when discussing the question. I tend to respond to various calls to conferences or publications as prompts, with a sort of curiosity: if I think of my practice from this perspective, with this theme in mind, what happens? Are there some new ideas emerging from a confrontation with this or that concept? Perhaps this way of working by responding could be articulated into a method as well.

The Trees

What about the trees, the remarkable and unremarkable trees that I met in Johannesburg? Who were they, where did they grow, how did I meet them and what remains of my meetings with them? As I already mentioned, the selection of trees is rather arbitrary, and not many of them would be considered remarkable in the traditional sense. There is an interest in remarkable trees in South Africa, as exemplified by several publications, including a book with exactly that title;[105] the National Register of Big Trees of South Africa, where the biggest indigenous trees are ranked according to their size, based on height, trunk and crown diameter;[106] and the Champion Tree project, focusing on trees of national conservation significance.[107] I actually had a preliminary appointment with one of the candidates for the Big Five indigenous trees, the Wonderboom fig in Pretoria, which was unfortunately cancelled due to COVID-19. The other four of the Big Five, the Sagole baobab, the Matumi, and the Monkey Thorn, all in Limpopo, and the Outeniqua yellowwood in the Eastern Cape were too far from Johannesburg to visit. Some of the trees listed as Champion Trees are (or were) growing in Johannesburg: two English oaks, and a Lombardy poplar that I never managed to find. Thus, the only Champion Tree included among the trees I met was the Wits Campus Tree, a 34-meter-high river red gum tree (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) with a stem diameter of 2,37 meters and a crown diameter of 37,55 meters.[108] Most of the trees were not remarkable in size, age or cultural significance, but either important to the person who presented the tree to me or, if chosen by me, simply beautiful or interesting, and, most importantly, accessible in their form and where they were growing.

Most of the trees I sat in or stood with in Johannesburg were of an alien or imported species, like the ombú tree (*Phytolacca dioica*), the cork tree (*Quercus suber*), the purple leaf acacia (*Acacia baileyana 'Purpurea'*), the jacaranda tree (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*), the London plane tree (*Platanus x acerifolia*), and a type of pine tree (*Pinus*). Some were indigenous trees, but not necessarily of local origin, like the karee tree (*Searsia lancea*), the Henkel's yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*), and the river bushwillow (*Combretum erythrophyllum*). During my short visit to Nirox, I had the chance to perform with a willow (*Salix babylonica*), some hackberry trees (*Celtis occidentalis*), and also with three Firethorn rhus (*Searsia pyroides*), which seemed to be indigenous to the area. All of these trees, with the exception of the willow, were new acquaintances to me. Even the oaks and the pine, which grow in Finland, were of a different species than the ones I had met before. The trees I chose myself I tried to identify as best I could – the ones growing in botanical gardens and parks often had labels. With the trees introduced to me, I left it to the introducer to choose whether the species of the tree was relevant information or not.

The selection of images of trees in the following text is organised into five parts, based on the way I encountered the trees. The first part, 'Trees Visited Repeatedly,' presents the trees that were recorded in my usual manner of making rough time-lapse videos, and include the oak on Galway Road that I visited daily, and the Firethorn rhus in Nirox Sculpture Park that I visited every hour for a day. The second part, 'Trees Presented to Me,' consists of images of trees I was introduced to by various people, named after the person who introduced them, and in the order that I met them. The transcripts of the spoken presentations are added to the images. The third part, 'Chosen Trees,' consists

105. Esterhuyse, et al., *Remarkable Trees of South Africa*.

106. Esterhuyse et al., *Remarkable Trees of South Africa*, 47.

107. Esterhuyse et al., *Remarkable Trees of South Africa*, 38.

108. Esterhuyse et al., *Remarkable Trees of South Africa*, 57. On the sign next to the tree on campus it is called a Blue Gum and I have used that name in my videos.

of trees that I chose myself when walking in various parks, and were trees that looked possible to sit in or spend time with, that were visually fascinating or seemed suitably located. They have only brief notes with the details of the recording added to them. The fourth part, 'Moving around Trees,' consists of two experiments with the Wits Blue Gum Tree and the Dutch Oak in Nirox. Finally, the fifth part, 'Writing With and To Trees,' includes two experiments, where I sat on or with two Firethorn rhus, one in the sculpture park and the other out in the bushveld, writing to the each of them there and then. All the images are video stills, not of the same quality as photographs, some of them rather dark, with the tree trunk almost as a silhouette. The images serve as documentation of the videos, which are available to watch online as small files.

Trees Visited Repeatedly

One way of exploring the specific relationship trees seem to have to time and space or place is to visit them repeatedly in the place where they grow. I have done that with several trees – usually for the duration of a year, sometimes three times a week – posing for a camera on a tripod with the tree, repeating the same framing of the image in order to create time-lapse videos. These repetitions formed my core practice within the project *Performing with Plants* in Helsinki (2017) and in Stockholm (2018-2019). During my ARA residency, as part of the new project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*, I wanted to focus on shorter time periods. In Johannesburg, I posed together with the oak on Galway Road every day from 13 February to 16 March 2020. In Nirox I posed with the Firethorn rhus on 17 March 2020, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., once every hour.

The Oak on Galway Road

The first tree I made acquaintance with in Johannesburg was the huge oak tree growing in the yard of the bed and breakfast I stayed at in Parkview. It was a tree with which I could easily perform daily, in order to create a kind of time-lapse video. I decided to record a brief moment with the tree every day, if possible, doing the simple yoga pose "Becoming a Tree," which I read about in a Finnish yoga magazine. It is a simple pose, not the "Tree Pose" standing on one leg, but simply reaching up with your arms, raising your heels, standing on your toes and staying there. The description, translated from Finnish, with the title 'How You Can Become a Tree,' is as follows:

> Stand in mountain pose, but with your feet hip-width apart. A narrower pose is possible, but I recommend the easier, wider position. Then you can concentrate on adding to the challenge in another way. If it works well with your feet together, it is not forbidden.
>
> Raise your heels. Raise your arms up. Focus your gaze in one spot. Stay there!
>
> Can it be so easy? Yes, almost. Let's add a few details, which can be useful.

I did not need any further challenge, as just trying to stand on my toes for a moment is hard enough. I practised this pose next to the old oak tree. The video *With the Oak on Galway Road*[109] (14 min 47 sec) comprises performances made with the oak (almost) every day between 13 February and 16 March 2020.

Moira MacMurray, the owner of the bed and breakfast I stayed in, told me about the oak trees in the area:

> The house was built in 1907, Parkview was proclaimed in 1907, and they started building. And it's a very interesting suburb. There was a major O'Hara who came from Kilkenny in Ireland, and he has built what we call the castle. And if you walk along Kilkenny Road you will see it, it is stone, but you might not because there is now quite a horrible wall in front of it. But it is a stone castle-like building with a turret. And he named the suburb, hence all the Irish names. He owned virtually half of the block of Kilkenny Road on the north side. Because, unlike Finland, here you live on the north side, not on the south side because of the sun. And that's why these houses are north-facing and are more desirable than the ones across the road because they're south-facing. Anyway... When he bought his home and built it with local stones on the property, he then wanted oak trees to remind him of his native Kilkenny in Ireland, and he imported oak trees. And he had a few over, which he kindly gave to a few of the people who were building also at the time. And we

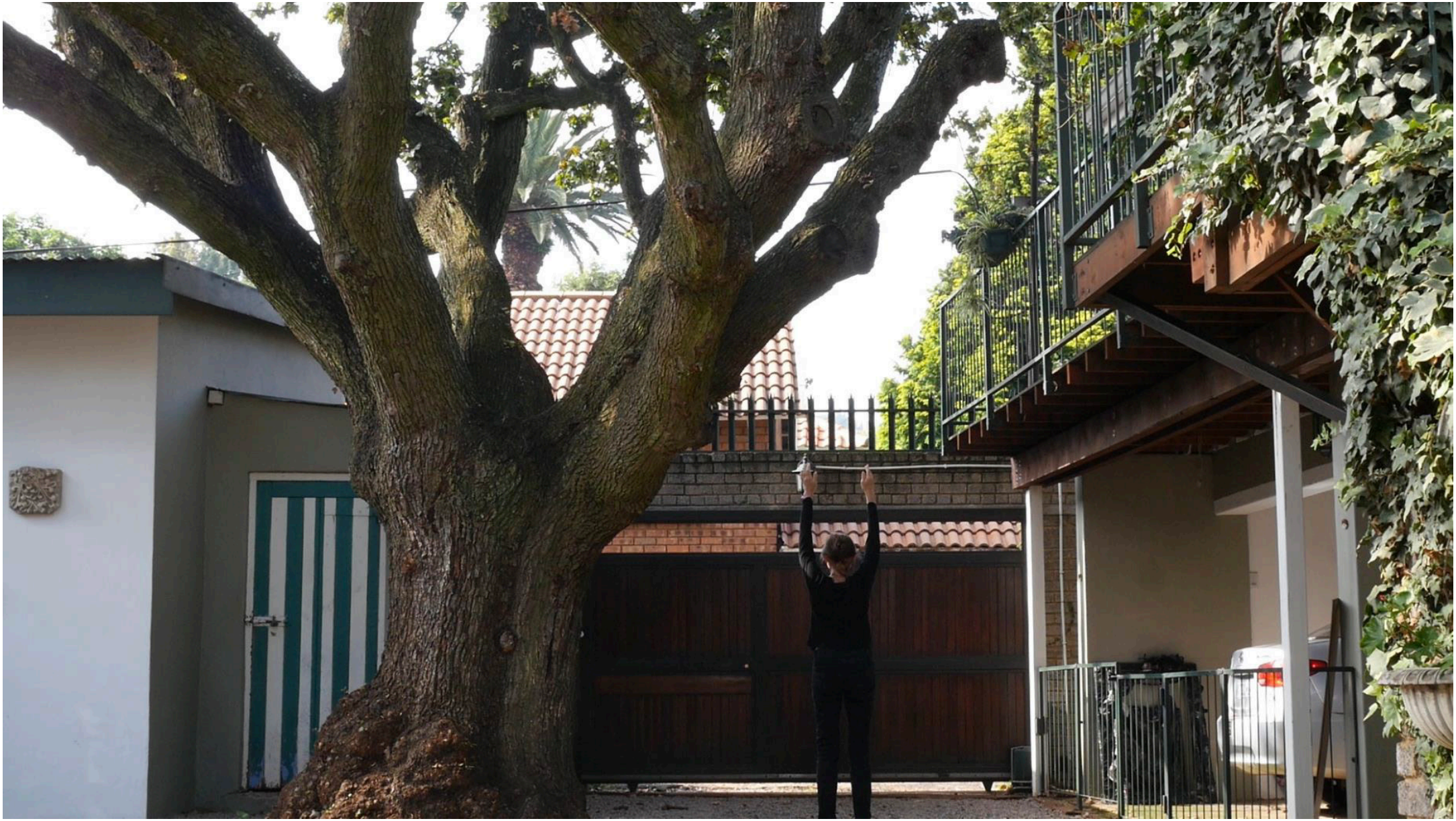
109. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=824645



were one of the lucky ones, this house goes back to 1907. He apparently wasn't a very nice man; he was a bit dictatorial and he had a tutor for his children. And he was known to drive his horse and carriage, or horses and carriages, along, and she would be walking home from here to Zoo Lake and he would not offer her a lift, he just splashed her with mud. He was, you know... But that's the story of the oak tree.

I think they were brought as saplings, imported as little trees, brought over by ship. Well, 1907 to 2020 is 113 years old. And don't forget the climate here... we get this very hot summer and most of the time lots of rain, so I suppose they grew well. But it is very big. They can live quite long; one came down in Kilkenny Road recently. We don't know if it was hit by lightning, it actually looked if it was a bit waterlogged, so we don't really know what happened. It might have been attacked by white ants or something. Or the borers, which would be very sad. If this tree goes, I shall be devastated. It's a beautiful tree and it's a beautiful tree to live with. Very interestingly, Thomas Pakenham, who is a very famous Irish tree-man... I actually sent him acorns from this oak tree, sent them back to Ireland. ... And the acorns keep falling on the roof. I'll tell you a very funny sorry about that. Years ago, we had an English couple staying here. And we said to them the next morning, how did you sleep? And she said, not very well. I said, why not? She said, the monkeys were throwing coconuts at the roof all night. Meanwhile it was the English oak with its acorns... Oh, we had a tree house in the oak. You must come up, up the stairs where my studio is, up there, and look at it because you can look in. And we had made a tree house for our youngest daughter in the oak – she was one when we got here. And we put a tree house there and oh, they loved it. And we made a rope ladder with wooden bits across, and she had a cat called Tiggis and she used to go up the ladder and the cat could go up the ladder one paw at the time like she was climbing, I'll never forget that, and that was wonderful. I think he sort of jumped down as cats would do, but he used to run up behind her, she was just a tiny little girl.

It's not that healthy; Joburg has had an aphid problem. Aphids are little things that eat the tree, eat the leaves. And we were having it sprayed twice a year to try and stop the problems with it. And then I realised it was killing all the ladybirds, and so I've stopped spraying it, because I love ladybirds, too. And if they're going to eat the aphids, well, anybody that has got spare ladybirds can bring them to me. Well, we've been here for 38 years, it is a wonderful house to live in, it's old, you know, you are in the stables here, it's got character, and the oak just adds to it, it's just a beautiful, beautiful tree. We've unfortunately just lost the huge jacaranda...



The Firethorn Rhus in Nirox

The Firethorn rhus (*Searsia pyroides*) growing in Nirox Sculpture Park looked like a sculpture in itself. Are they one or two? The video, *Day with the Firethorn Rhus*[110] (24 min 10 sec) records a brief still-act together with them every hour between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m. on 17 March 2020, and is made using the same rough time-lapse technique I have tried with some other trees and shrubs. The recordings were edited into a longer version (51 min 30 sec) as well, which includes the performances in full. After each session with the tree(s), I wrote a short text:

17.3.2020, 7 a.m.
Dear Little Tree, or Trees,

Hello! It was nice standing next to you for a moment, and I hope you don't mind that I am going to visit you today several times, actually once every hour, if all goes well. I noticed you, the two of you, last night when walking around in the park marvelling at the sculptures, and beautiful willows, and all kinds of trees, and water features. You seemed so unassuming and somehow modest, although formed in such an interesting way. And the sun was setting somewhere behind you in a pleasant way. So, this morning when I woke, I had the thought to come and visit you, as soon as possible, to commence my day with you. In these days when all the world is in shock and awe because of the Coronavirus pandemic, it feels so comforting to spend time with you in this peaceful sanctuary. Thank you for letting me do that!

17.3.2020, 8 a.m.
Dear Little Trees,

After my second visit to you I feel more confident in spending the day together, although it seems to be a rather chilly day. Right now, it is only 12 degrees, which is quite a drop from 25 yesterday. There is no sun and the wind feels cold. When I stand next to you, I listen to the running water, and look at the birds among the reeds on the opposite side. Far away across the field, a man walks to work, I guess. I do not know your name or species, which irritates me a little. You look rather familiar, resembling some type of trees at home, but then, not really. Your leaves seem to be a little furry, or at least soft, but many of them are clearly plagued by some insects or a disease. I hope you don't suffer too much! Although one of your trunks is covered with lichen and a large branch has been cut off, your crown is quite wide and green. And the place you grow in has both space to spread and neighbours

110. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433



to support you. I wonder if you really are twins—two separate trees—or only two trunks from the same root? Perhaps it does not make such a big difference in the end.

17.3.2020, 9 a.m.
With the sun almost showing up, it is a little warmer, or then I simply imagine. The difference in light is minimal, though, because of the cloud cover. You are probably much more sensitive to light than I am because light is your main energy source, your food in some sense, what makes you thrive. Of course, you need water and minerals like all or most other forms of life as we know it, but light is the energy source for your photosynthesis, your speciality. It is indeed something to envy, a capacity to generate not only your own food, but food for everybody else. They say that one can remove 70% of your leaves, or the leaves of any plant, and you could simply grow them back, or grow new ones. It is a miracle in some sense, a very beautiful strategy of generosity. To give away not only half of what you make but 70% of it to others, wow! It exceeds all Christian ideas of giving your other shirt to the one who needs it.

But, regardless of your generosity, the generosity of all plant life, it seems to me that you are not really well, your leaves show signs of withering and malformation. I guess there are simply too many insects feeding on you right now. Or, perhaps I am mistaken, perhaps you don't mind if your leaves look grungy, as long as the photosynthesis machine is running. And it is only my misguided aesthetic sensibilities that imagine you would feel bothered. But, on the other hand, it would be strange if you would not sense them somehow. And isn't that what science has discovered, that you or your kin can actually emit chemicals that send out signals to other insects or birds to come to the rescue and eat some of insects that bother you. Life is complicated, for sure!

17.3.2020, 10 a.m.
The sound of a lawn mower adds to the sound of running water, and then disappears again. It is moving at the other end of this large park, an extra-ordinary sculpture park with water in ponds or small brooks, providing the perfect setting for a multitude of artworks, large sculptures as well as smaller ones that you discover only when coming close. Probably this abundance of sculptures made me look at you, too, in terms of your sculptural form. I am eager to know more about you and will try to ask people here if they might know. But, strictly speaking, the names of trees are only important for humans, a human invention to control and organise and try to master their surroundings. For you it probably does not matter what I call you. With that I do not mean that you would not recognise your kin, your family or relatives, or that it would not matter to you. I only propose that the name and species identification in terms of taxonomy is irrelevant for you. It is, in a strange way, important to me, however, because it serves as the entrance to more knowledge about you, your history and preferences, for instance. But, seen in another way, that need to know, that strange curiosity of mine, is simply a human habit, that should not disturb our relationship...



17.3.2020, 11 a.m.
So, now I know your name, your human name, which according [sic] my host is "Rhus pyroides," or today "Searsia pyroides," or "Common currant-rhus." I looked you up on the internet and it seems that you are a native of South Africa and that you can vary a lot in size and shape, so you can be bushy or thorny, depending on your growing environment. You can be found in the bushveld or savannah, in dry thornveld and on rocky hillsides. And also, in luscious gardens, like here. You are supposed to be very hardy, tough and drought resistant, too. There are male and female individuals and the females bear small fruits. I have not found any fruits on you, so you might be a male. Or then, the few dry things next to your leaves might be former fruits, devastated by insects. In that case you are a female. Or what if one of you is male and the other female? The branches hang low only on one side. Perhaps that would be too romantic, or anthropomorphic to imagine that. I prefer to think of you as twins, or as an individual with a dual "personality." At least, until further notice...

17.3.2020, noon
My intuition seems to be correct: there were small crumbled berries, or rather dried flowers, on the branches of both entwined trunks, so it might be you are really two males, or then just one dual male. You are a host to the moth Xylopteryx arcuata *(what a name!) and it might be that those moths have burdened you in excess. On the other hand, it is the end of season, end of summer, so no wonder you look a little tired. I suppose there would be berries or fruit if you were a female, though.*

There will obviously not be much sun today, which is fine with me; only the shifts in light make the images more interesting. There might even be rain later today, even a thunderstorm. I suppose you would find it refreshing, and it might look spectacular, but the camera would probably not like it very much. I have to find some plastic protection for it, if need be...

17.3.2020, 1 p.m.
During this Coronavirus pandemic-panic it is an utter luxury to spend time with you here, in peace and harmony, surrounded by beauty and calm. It is not possible, however, to forget the chaos and anxiety of the surrounding world, closing off slowly or quickly, and the accompanying difficulties. Should I stay in this country as planned or should I try to leave as soon as possible. And if so, when would that be? Right now, I am here with you, waiting for news from my helpful project manager. The person who would be able to change the flight is ill, however, and it seems like nobody knows really what to do. That gives me a little bit of extra time, despite the fact that Finnish citizens are supposed to return home as soon as possible. Right now, there is nothing I can do except wait. And spend time with you. Thank you for you comforting company!

17.3.2020, 2 p.m.
After a delicious lunch, life feels so much easier, funny enough. But what is now rather obvious, is the lack of sun, which means that all the images where we perform or appear

together look probably rather similar. Before the next session I have to change the battery in the camera, and I hope I can recreate the same framing or something sufficiently similar. The framing does not affect your performance, of course, but it does have an impact on the viewer of the video that I will edit of our meeting. If there is a sudden change or "jump" between the images the feeling of a smooth succession is destroyed, and focus is diverted from the minuscule shift in light and shadow. Now that I think of it, it might be even more interesting to have such uniform light. There will be shifts and changes inevitably, but probably hardly noticeable. And that is even more exciting, in some sense. Exciting for the viewer, that is, who is attuned to visual nuances, not necessarily for us, performing together in the grey semi-shadow. But such soft grey light is soothing, too.

17.3.2020, 3 p.m.
For a brief moment it seemed like the sun would come out from the clouds, or rather through the clouds, but it soon disappeared again. At least the battery change went relatively smoothly. I came to think of you as "the dancing rhus trees," and perhaps that could be a good name for the video—except that it limits and specifies the associations too much. But you do look like two dancing figures, feet together, stretching their arms out in an oval form. Well, talk about anthropomorphic imagination! The more I visit you, the more I come to like you, but there is always the danger that I only like my own projections or fantasies. If I would really be able to sense your feelings or reactions, I might be very surprised. Perhaps you really detest my coming so close to you, or prepare for combat in fear of being hurt, or most likely, hardly notice me at all. When I began visiting trees, I thought you were slower than humans, so I imagined staying with you for a few minutes, sitting or leaning on you, would resemble a handshake or a quick embrace. But scientists say you are not slow at all, because you can react very quickly by emitting chemicals when under threat. I do hope you can sense that I come with friendly thoughts and am not posing any kind of threat, at least, not any that I know of...

17.3.2020, 4 p.m.
When I look at the weather forecast, it is supposed to be raining here, but when I look at the sky, I see clouds, yes, but no rain yet. The wind has calmed down, and the birds are silent, everybody is waiting for the rain to start. You don't seem to mind, though. And why would you? Rain is probably a pleasure for you, sweeping away some of the moths and the dust, a refreshing shower. The camera would not like the rain, so I brought a plastic bag to cover it while it stays out with you, waiting for the next session. There are not that many of them left. The sun will set at 20 minutes past six, so the last session, planned to be at 7 p.m. (since I began at 7 a.m.) might be in complete darkness. Before that, two more "normal" sessions. They feel like being all the same—except for the wind, but the camera will probably notice differences that I do not. And you have surely adjusted your leaves according to the shifting light—although I cannot see it. Strangely enough, although I feel more relaxed with you and enjoy our moments of performance together, I have not come any closer to you, I think. You remain mysterious and self-enclosed, and that is fine, I respect your wish to be who you are.

17.3.2020, 5 p.m.
Still no rain, which is fine! There is a feeling of end-of-day in the air, even though it is not time for dusk yet. Where did this day go? How did we spend it, our only day together? Or how did I make use of or engage with or enjoy my enormous privilege of being able to spend this day here with you? Like always, I have spent most of the time worrying about the future, planning and imagining, sometimes recollecting, but less so than usual, perhaps because I am so aware of the limited time I am here in this magic garden, and in this country altogether. You, on the other hand, will most likely spend the rest of your days here in this place and they will be many, hopefully. I do not know how old you are, and I cannot find your average life span noted anywhere. I do note that you are liked by many birds because of your berries (which I have not seen, though) and that different parts of you have been used for various medicinal purposes. Since they say you are drought resistant and call you hardy and tough, they probably mean that you are long-lived, too. I also learned that you are sometimes called Firethorn but have not seen any thorns on you. The more I read about you, the more I begin to doubt if you really are this Searsia pyroides, or Rhus pyroides. Since one of the first descriptions I encountered began by saying that you are "very variable in all respects" I trust that you simply are a very special individual. So, pleased to meet you, dear Firethorn.

17.3.2020, 6 p.m.
And now the rain came, right when I stood next to you thinking that it was already dark despite the 20 minutes left to sunset. The first drops fell on my skin through your leaves, and the first lightning with some thunder in the distance began at the end of our performance. When I walked back to the house, with the camera, the drops began to fall heavier, and a harsh lightning illuminated the path so suddenly that I thought it had struck nearby. Now, when I am sitting indoors writing this, the rainfall is like a shower. All day this storm was incoming, and it had a perfect timing in terms of our collaboration. The wind had changed its direction, I could sense it while standing with you, and the gusts became stronger, but I was not worried and did not hurry. Now, when I see the force of the rain, I hope you do not suffer but rather enjoy it. And probably you are accustomed to these storms. They are quite spectacular, I must say. Our day together was calm and peaceful. Thank you for the experience, and all the best for the future!



Trees Presented to Me

When planning my stay in Johannesburg, I thought the best way to learn about trees there would be to ask people to introduce me to trees that were important to them, or somehow remarkable from their perspective. The idea of asking people to introduce me to trees that were significant to them had crossed my mind before, but I had never actually tried it. In the beginning, I thought that, after being introduced, I would perform with those trees in some way, or spend time with them and try to get to know them. The first person to present a tree to me was Myer Taub. He wondered whether he should perform – and I immediately realised that would be much more interesting than myself performing. I also wanted to record why he chose that specific tree, as a way of making notes. When I tried to add the story that he told me as a voice-over to the video, a technique emerged that was new to me. This kind of basic documentary mode is well known and much used. For me, however, this was something unfamiliar and exciting, a technique I then used with all the trees that were presented to me: Myer's Oak, Samuel's Oak, Christo's Cabbage Tree, Donald's Searsia, Tina's Palm Tree, Shilongane's Tree, Bushi's Peach Tree, Manola's Eucalyptus (Gum) Tree and Manola's Nettle Tree. In the recording added as a voice-over to the video, each person describes their choice of that specific tree. In the following, a transcription of the spoken text is added to the still image from the video.

Myer's Oak

This tree, probably a Spanish oak, growing in Paterson Park in Norwood, was chosen by Myer Taub and the video (10 min) was performed and recounted by him there on 17 February 2020. In the voice-over recorded on site he explains:

> So, I pass these trees more than once a day. This is my local park, very local, very close to where I live. And this morning I was here, and I was in panic because perhaps it wasn't the correct tree, I thought. Maybe there were... you know, I have more than one tree. In the area from where the metal trees are, you know, all the way around to this tree and beyond. Even the trees in the distance there, those dying trees, those skeletal trees. But this tree, this tree is interesting because it's almost like a tree that lies to you, you know. It's welcoming, but it's not really. It's very decorative and sculptural when you get closer to it and it is very interesting in terms of what the formations have done to it in terms of its core, which makes it very interesting and engaging to want to go in. But it's very difficult to go inside or to climb into it. It's not the first time I've tried, but not as intensely as I did now in terms of trying to climb the tree, which points to a few things: one, that I am unfit, getting old; two, that I must start climbing trees to get fit; three, that the tree doesn't really want you to climb it, and it's quite happy to tease you into, you know... It's a tease of a tree. It wants you to imagine that you can climb it or for it to be accessible, but the tree itself is, enchanting as it is on the side of the road close to the *spruit* as it kind of encroaches the water or the bank of the kind of natural river, the little river that runs alongside it. It is not an indigenous tree, it's more than likely some kind of oak. Its leaves are succulent, kind of, not succulent but a waxy leaf, which is not an indigenous leaf at all. It's very strong, it seems to be a very strong and hardy tree, and as I said quite sculptural. And it's a tree that you pass by on your way to somewhere, at least for me. And it's like a friend. I often more than likely see it once or twice a day. – And I don't think it has the beetle, though. I don't think it's a beetle tree, or if it is, it might have to do with place. Because in a sense it really needs a lot of water, its right by the embankment. Actually, you're right, if one looks up at it, it thins out, just like age perhaps. It's an aging tree, an aging oak. But the thing about this tree and the other trees is that there is this kind of association with the park. And those trees in the distance, those metal trees in the distance, are actually from a theatre work that I directed with the community. So, those trees come from the piece, the work that I did with them called *The Birds of the Grove*. And there is something quite significant of those metal trees in relationship to the other trees and my association with the park. Those hands in the distance are birds, but they are made from the palms, of the inner palms of your hand that are birds, as I said, and they are the hands of the actors and the people involved with the play. If you see a hand with a little bent finger, then you know that it's my hand. But I suppose

that those trees also point to the relationship or the kind of thing that is special about this park, which is a very old park in terms of Johannesburg history. But it's been not open to the public for almost ten years, and it only started to be open again in the last year. And I think that the way that the neighbourhood engages with the park, I think it's a very special park. Not many people know about it, and well, because it kind of points to the possibility of, you know, a kind of environmental rejuvenation in the city.

Kind of the linking of the trees, this side of the embankment and then those two maple trees on the other side; one that sits on the side of a bench and then another one that sits next to some wooden benches, over there. And then up to the metal trees, and then there is... And these trees, this cluster of trees over here, are very interesting, these ones over here in the shade, that produce the shade. Those are really the kind of, there is some kind of connection of trees. I read something on the weekend which has something to do with your theory of massing and it was something, an article someone wrote about how trees like to grow together, as a collective of trees, and being together somehow, connecting somehow, however that is.

I would say it is about 70, 70 years old, yes. I mean, if we can say that this area used to be farmland, known as Orange Grove, mostly because of the orange groves, the oranges that they had grown in the area. Most of this area was farmland being fertilized by the water by the *spruits* that ran alongside it. And the farms were there to, you know, to provide produce for a growing inner city that was founded on gold. So, this, all of this is farmland. The farms probably were here... Well, Johannesburg now is 120 years old, so about 100 years old as kind of farms, but probably really kind of existing in its urban history for about 70 years.



Samuel's Oak

This tree, some species of oak, growing in George Hay Park in Parkview, was chosen by Samuel Ancer, and the video (7 min 10 sec) was performed by him there on 26 February 2020. The story, added as a voice-over, was recorded on 28 February. There he explains:

> My name is Samuel Ancer, I am the project manager for Annette during her stay in South Africa and I am assisting her in her project of meeting remarkable and unremarkable trees. During her visit she asked me if I knew of any remarkable or unremarkable trees that were important to me and I felt there were a number of trees that had some importance, but maybe not the most accessible trees. So, once I realised which tree would be the most accessible it was quite obvious that I visit the tree in George Hay Park, the oak tree there. This tree was something me and my friends would go and climb when we were in our teens, from the age of about fourteen till about sixteen/seventeen. We would go there in the afternoon and there would be a few of us, would be... maybe four of five of us would climb and we each would have our own little spots within the tree. And the goal was to make sure that we weren't visible to the viewers, the passers-by, the people who would walk through the park. We wanted to be private because we were going up there to smoke cigarettes and talk about girls and things like that, and we didn't want the rest of the world to see us doing so. I remember my time of climbing the tree, I never really worried about falling. I would go up there, with some difficulty, I wasn't the strongest child, but once I was up there, I never really worried about the fact that I could fall, the consequences of falling even. But climbing up recently I was so... It stunned me how much the fear sort of persisted and stayed with me even once I was in a secure position, I was constantly worried about falling out. And I held an iron grip along, actually. And it was kind of remarkable that I would take my hands off ever, when I was younger. And yet, yeah, that was sort of a place I would relax and feel comfortable in and yet now it just seemed so dangerous. Yes, and what's interesting also is that the tree was no longer so covered with branches and leaves. It had been cut back severely, so now it was no longer a space where I could hide from the world. It became more open and more... yeah, more open and vulnerable, I suppose, due to its branches being removed and things like that. So yes, that's the oak tree that me and my friends would climb. I remember when we would climb up it and often, we would look up and see equipment for vagrants. Homeless people would leave their valuables, their clothes, their belongings, their bags, their tents, what have you up in the tree. And one time we climbed up we actually saw someone sleeping in the tree. And we kind of remarked on it and laughed about it a bit and

climbed down. But, again thinking back, I could have been in danger, and yet I was completely relaxed. I had no fear of the consequences of anything in that tree.

In my youth, as I said it was quite a covered bush so you would not be able to see three feet beyond where the tree was, in spite of its higher position. But, now as the tree has aged, as have I, its leaves are less thick, and you can see in the whole park and beyond. You can see into the houses that surround the park... yeah, you can see the entire area. It was once a place where you did not even know what was around the corner, and now it is a place where you can see the corner and beyond. What was always striking was the sound from around the tree and the sound of children playing, the sound of the parents calling out. And while so much of that tree had changed the sounds that surrounded it stayed the same. The children still played, the parents still shouted, but the tree and I had changed.



Christo's Cabbage Tree

This tree, a cabbage tree growing in Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve southeast of Johannesburg, was chosen by Christo Doherty. The video (4 min 27 sec) was performed by him with two different cabbage trees on 1 March 2020. He describes his choice as follows:

> I think the cabbage tree is a very humorous and warm-hearted tree. I enjoy the look of it, the way it has developed itself to survive in this very harsh climate with frequent bushfires. And the way that its response has been, not like many of the other plants that survive, which have become very thorny and spiky, but what the cabbage tree has done is to grow very tall and push its leaves up above the flames of the fires. And it has developed a remarkably soft, almost cork-like bark, which is fireproof but is very soft and comfortable. So, it's a tree that cries out to be hugged. And these are all reasons that I appreciate the cabbage tree.
>
> I don't know if it's used for any medicinal purposes, I don't know of any, and its fruit is not edible, but its flowers attract enormous quantities of bees. So, at the time that it's flowering you can actually hear the cabbage trees even before you get to see them from the multitudes of bees that come to the flower.
>
> It's very much a plant that likes to be up in the open, in its environment of the grasslands, the highveld. So, people, I've seen some people with indigenous gardens who have successfully grown cabbage trees, but you generally don't see them in Johannesburg gardens. You don't see them in the streets. It stands out in the grass-veld, this rolling open grass-veld of Gauteng area. Once you know about the cabbage tree you spot them. So, it's a very characteristic tree of this area.



Donald's Searsia

This tree, *Searsia magalismontana*, is a small shrub, or underground tree, growing in the Melville Koppies reserve, and was chosen by Donald McCallum. The video (3 min 53 sec) was performed by him at the reserve on 5 March 2020. In the recording he recounts his choice:

> This is one of my favourite trees and the reason why it's quite an interesting tree, because it is an underground tree. And all the little shoots around here are really joined together somewhere through the cracks. And it's called *Searsia magalismontana*, which is after Magalisburg where it was discovered. And it's a member of the mango family. And what's interesting is the tiny little fruits look sort of mango-shaped and they are also edible; so, not wonderful, they have a huge pip and they are not particularly tasty, but in the bush, there is something for you to eat. And what's pretty about this, in spring, when the new leaves come out, they're all pink. And so, you get this lovely pink sticking out all over the rocks. It prefers this sort of rocky ground and part of the reason why it's underground as a tree is because it's in grassland where there is fire and so, having the tops only sticking out. If a fire comes through that's really hot and damages it, the top of the bush is destroyed but it's got all its underground parts and it will very quickly just pop out a whole new top canopy. And so, because I enjoy grassland, that's why this underground tree strikes a chord with me. And the beauty of grassland, it is one of the most diverse, botanically diverse biomes in the world. And it is also the most threatened. It's an easy place to build, it's an easy place to farm, so grassland disappears fastest. And what many people don't realise is a lot of grassland plants like this *Searsia*, it might be hundreds of years old, this individual. It's not a tree in the sense that the trunk will be meters tall, the trunk will probably be quite small, you know, maybe a meter or two, and probably at the thickest it might have a thickness like that... But the fact that it's got the tips of the branches sticking out and its very woody, people think of it as a tree. But maybe underground shrub is also, but it's tree-like in as much as it's got branches and it's got a trunk and it's got lots of woody bits and just the tips of the branches stick out. *Searsia* is quite a big genus, there are quite a lot of different species. Most of them are trees that stick out or at least big shrubs. But this one is a tiny little one and a huge amount of it is underground. This little cap over there is very pretty, too.



Tina's Palm Tree

This tree, a palm tree growing outside the Gleneagles building on 2nd Avenue in Killarney, was chosen by Tina Johnson. The video (4 min 48 sec) was performed by her in her home there, on 7 March 2020. On video, she recounts the following:

> This tree is the tree I am sharing with you, and it looks to me like it is these large very generous characters that are looking in the window and watching, in a good sense. They're like guardians. And they are rather goofy, especially in the wind. They start, you know, and they nod and... If you're in a certain mood they respond emotionally. See, even now they're moving; they're very happy that we're documenting them. Look at the one...; they're waving back and forth. So, they're very, to me, emotionally present. And they are supportive, they are kind. And it's a very, very tall tree. And once my landlord asked me not to bring in pork into the house. So, I bought a salami and I did not know that salami is pork. And when I realised it – oh yeah, see it's like they bow, when the wind comes, they bow and they're kind of like, they're very friendly creatures. But anyway, so I realised the salami was pork and oh, I cannot have it in the house, she asked me not to have pork in the house. So, I tried to throw it out the window in a tied bag thinking that maybe someone would pick up the salami. And instead the tree, the tree... it fell in one of the palms, the things that shoot out of the tree. And it was swaying there for about a month, you know, my guilty salami. And finally, the tree let it go. But, I mean, so this, I don't have a name for it, but often when I live in a house the trees out the window are like spirits to me. They are like spirits that are protecting and watching and participating. So, that's my story of the beautiful palm tree. Okay, shall I tell you anything more? See how it sways. And if I feel sad and homesick, it's kind of, you know, it bends in the wind and everything is okay.
>
> It's a chorus of how many dancers: one, two, three, four five, six, seven, at least eight or nine dancers that perform daily. And they hover, they care, so... They're very calm now. And sometimes they look like characters from Sesame Street as well.
>
> But I don't think they're a tree you can sit in. I think it's too high. I think you might get prickly things there. It used to have a branch of another tree that was growing out, but it's gone now. And this tree is five stories high.



Shilongane's Tree

This tree, growing on the roadside near Pretoria, was chosen by Shilongane Nkoana. She performed for the video (2 min 20 sec) on 11 March 2020, and describes her relationship to it as follows:

> Oh, I've been passing this tree since last year, yeah, last year June, and I've felt like connected to the tree. Actually, I didn't know why I'm connected to the tree. And it doesn't change, this tree is like this all the time whether it's summer, autumn, winter, spring, the tree is still the same. It's beautiful, you look at it into the clouds; you look at it you see the clouds, that's how big it is. And spiritually, because my ancestors, when we give thanks or when we pray to the ancestors, we do it through nature, which could be through trees or land, soil. So, most of the time we do it through trees and that's how I felt like I'm connected to this tree. That's how we communicate with the ancestors in Limpopo, that's how we connect with our gods. So, I don't know, I just like this tree, I don't know why I like this tree. Probably it's my great grandmother trying to talk to me through the tree because it's old. It looks old, we don't know how old the tree is, it looks old. So, spiritually I feel connected to the trees, to this specific tree.



Bushi's Peach Tree

This tree, a peach tree growing in her home yard in Mamelodi east, Pretoria, was chosen by Busisiwe Mahlangu. The video (1 min 52 sec) and the poem written and performed by her, were recorded there on 11 March 2020.

Okay, this is a poem titled *Talking Trees*, inspired by talking trees. So, it goes like this:

A tree is a monument
Watching us
Printing our names on its body
As long as it lives, we will not be forgotten
I watch my legs become roots
I watch them dig into the ground and my whole body extends into a tree
I am not stuck
I'm trusting the wind to take me home
If it blows strong enough my heart can reach yours
We can hold hands over the border
We can laugh like we taught this world to shrink long enough for us to kiss
I'm counting the ways that my language can be yours
And I can speak your tongue without translation
I can see the days when Ife Mi
Is a reminder that I am here for you
And *s'thandwa sami* is a shield against anything that can keep us apart
I spent the whole day studying Nigeria's internet
I'm afraid how easy it is to deplete voices,
How a lover's body can be erased overnight,
This threat holds me by the throat
I imagine what the world looked like before our phones
If we could shrink it for a kiss
If we can ride the wind to each other
If we can pull our legs from the soil and walk



Manola's Eucalyptus/ Gum Tree

This tree, a blue gum growing on the Braamfontein campus of the University of the Witwatersrand was chosen by Manola Gayatri Kumarswamy. The video (4 min 26 sec) was recorded on two occasions, 4 and 14 March 2020. She speaks about her relationship to gum trees or eucalyptus trees:

> Yeah, when we saw the gum tree on Grant Avenue, I was saying that one of my favourite trees in school were gum trees. I mean, I didn't know the generic term was gum, we called them eucalyptus trees, so I could see them from... Throughout high school all my classrooms faced this window, so I would be staring out at them and at the sky. And there was a way, because they were the tallest trees, they would somehow also kind of lattice the sky. It was just nice to be staring out when you were supposed to be looking at your books and looking at the trees it was lovely.
>
> I was... when I was doing work with women and empowerment, for rural women's political empowerment, actually; they were already leaders, and these were training programs. And I did some of that work with my father. And we were looking at different resources on different days and also different things that we were surrounded with. So, he had this way of approaching trees, and in which you kind of go still and sense your way around the tree, almost as if you get in touch with your own breath and your own energy. And then you slowly wait to try to listen to the trees and you just... So, we'd have an afternoon off to spend some time with the tree. And many people who did it, did that exercise, used to feel the tree speak back to them, or just somehow, they would feel the leaf coming towards them. Or they would feel this kind of something stooping almost to reach them back. And there was this incredible sense of connection. And I always, so I thought about that, I think about that, in terms of how the tree notices you, also. And when we were walking now, I wondered when the tree would notice us. 'Cause it's easy to notice it even from afar. I just felt very aware of it, yeah, and I... (reads) We, we come again, and we have called it a gum tree now, one that is the oldest in Johannesburg we are told. I sit, stand, rest against this old tree and feel its roots deep, its leaves high in the wind and wet in the ground, drying and moist. I don't want to think of my father, but I do. When he died it felt as if a tree had been uprooted. And I only knew I had to learn to become a tree myself to overcome the grief.



Manola's Eucalyptus/Gum Tree

Manola's Nettle Tree

Manola and I tried to make a small video on Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. However, we were told that we needed permission to film, which could only be obtained on weekdays, so we only took still photos. Manola then explained why she thought it was important to go there, and why she would like to perform there:

> So I walked through Constitution Hill one day and as I was passing, it was a strange incident, I'll tell you about that later, but when I was passing and when I was entering that complex as I climbed down the stairs there were all these, you know, protest songs coming and the speeches of different like South African leaders, and I saw this sculpture which said be kind, and I saw their photographs. And then I came, and I stood, and I saw this tower, and then there was the flame of democracy and this was this big tourist spot, right. But it was just somehow very, very powerful, very evocative. And I felt, and I was there, since I came, you know I was in a sari and I was standing in front of that flame. And it was, that Constitution Hill was claiming something about nationhood and citizenship and about this sort of emancipatory thing, which was important for me and why I came to South Africa to look at how it became a democracy. And it sits for me strongly. And as I walked a little bit further there was this sculpture of these women, these people dancing, and there was this man and this woman taking photographs amidst it. And then there was this tree popping through the sculptures and through the thing. And behind it were this building which had a lot of plates of the tree of life, which is a huge symbol in Africa. And I just thought, I just felt so much affection for this tree because in between all of these buildings of man, these trees were there. And also, they were in those rows, and you know these slender trees. And somehow, they had to be there as trees in between all of these sculptures and all of this symbolism. And somehow, they seemed to belong in a particular way, but it felt like they were talking back to that very severe political condition, too. And, it was their location there and their survival in that location there, that kind of made me feel very moved and very close to it. So, also when we came away from the gum tree, which was so big and had all that space for itself there. And it was like that gum tree I felt was like holding the whole area and that whole space. But there was also something quite pleasant about being able to go and hold this tree, you know, and hug it and yeah, so. It was important for me coming from India, looking at transformation and interested in the South African moment and interested in the question of democracy, to see that tree sitting in the middle of all of that symbolism, also. I don't know yet, I want to go back, I want to spend more time with that three and I'll know more, why, but it is very attractive to me for some reason.



Chosen Trees

Besides inviting people to introduce me to remarkable or unremarkable trees in Johannesburg, I tried to find trees myself. I soon realised that the best way to get to know some interesting trees during my short stay in a city with such an abundance of all kinds of trees was to simply visit as many parks as possible. Rather than visiting a few trees regularly, a strategy I used in Helsinki and Stockholm, I would then spend only a moment together with each of them. I walked around in parks, sometimes on my own, but mostly together with my project manager, Samuel Ancer, or some other people, in search for interesting trees. I was told that there was no way I could place a camera on a tripod and leave it there while turning my back to it and sitting in a tree further away. Thus, somebody would keep an eye on the camera during my meeting with the tree. Some of the trees I noticed while walking on my own, and then returned to. Most of them I encountered on joint walks in various parks near where I lived. Through readings and conversations, I learned that the difference between indigenous and imported or exotic trees was important, including the discussion regarding invasive species. For me, all the trees were exotic at first. Even the occasional birch trees that I unexpectedly encountered, for example, on Wits campus, seemed completely unfamiliar and strange in this new environment. Although I understood that specific trees could serve as reminders of a particular colonial legacy that people did not want to keep alive, trees seemed to be so rooted in their place of growth, that it seemed difficult to think of them being foreign. The first tree I met and tried to sit in was an ombú tree, originating in South America, like the famous jacarandas. The jacarandas and the shot hole borer beetle-infested plane trees that line the streets in the northern suburbs are emblematic of the city in many ways, but also very difficult to perform with – a single tree could not express the effect of a whole tree-lined street. Most of my meetings with trees took place in parks near where I lived and lasted a maximum of twenty minutes: the time my camera could record video in a single recording. Sometimes, our meetings were much shorter. Some planned meetings never took place because of my earlier-than-planned return home. However, I nevertheless managed to briefly meet quite a few trees, albeit in a geographically limited area.

In the Ombú Tree

This tree, an ombú tree (*Phytolacca dioica*) growing in Paterson Park in Norwood, seemed inviting due to its widespread trunk that allowed climbing into the tree. The video (4 min 32 sec) was performed on 17 February 2020. Another version (2 min 12 sec), In the Ombú Tree[111] – with commentary, includes a voice-over by Samuel Ancer, where he describes the situation:

> I stood watch over Annette's camera as she began her first piece of *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg*. We were in Paterson Park, which has foot traffic from the street. A few people had walked past and checked us out, but didn't pay us too much attention. I was initially worried about the camera, as we placed it in a road where construction vehicles had been driving through. This didn't seem to be too much of an issue, as time went on, though. Eventually, I noticed a boy walk up and look at us. He then turned around. I thought maybe he was avoiding something or going to meet up with someone, so I paid it no mind. Then I noticed the same boy had arrived with two other boys. They seemed to be looking at the camera and myself. I began to worry as it looked like they were planning something. I decided to pick up a stone and make it visible to the boys to dissuade them from any bad ideas. I then noticed the boys pick up large sticks and thought it was best that we get out of there. I called to Annette, perhaps too softly at first, not wanting to ruin her footage, but then I called more urgently for us to move. She heard me, and I grabbed the camera, and we quickly made our way to a more public section of the park in order to avoid any altercation. While this may have been an overreaction on my part, I do feel it was better to be safe than sorry in this situation.

111. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=801843



In the Cork Tree

This tree, one of many cork trees (*Quercus suber*) growing in the Johannesburg Botanical Gardens, seemed inviting due to its warm bark and its strong, low-spreading branches. The video (19 min 47 sec) was performed on 26 February 2020.



In the Karee Tree

This tree, labelled karee (*Searsia lancea*), is an indigenous tree growing in the Johannesburg Botanical Gardens and was inviting due to its bent, almost bench-like form. The video (14 min 36 sec) was performed on 26 February 2020.



In the Purple Leaf Acacia

This tree labelled a purple leaf acacia (*Acacia baileyana 'Purpurea'*), growing in the Johannesburg Botanical Gardens, was fascinating due to its bluish or silvery leaves. The two videos (19 min 46 sec each) were performed and recorded from two different directions on 26 February 2020.





In the River Bushwillow

This tree, labelled a river bushwillow (*Combretum erythrophyllum*), growing high up on the western slope in The Wilds, a park containing many native trees from all over South Africa, was a perfect tree to climb into due to its strong and thick branches. The video (15 min 53 sec) was performed on 4 March 2020.



With a Henkel's Yellowwood

This tree, labelled a Henkel's yellowwood (*Podocarpus henkelii*), growing on the eastern slope of The Wilds park provided soothing shade. The video (20 min 32 sec) was performed on 4 March 2020.



In the Jacaranda Tree

This jacaranda tree (*Jacaranda mimosifolia*), a tree emblematic of many suburbs and streets in Johannesburg, growing in Killarney Park, was exceptional due to its accessible location and its comfortably divided trunk. The video (15 min 58 sec) was performed on 7 March 2020.



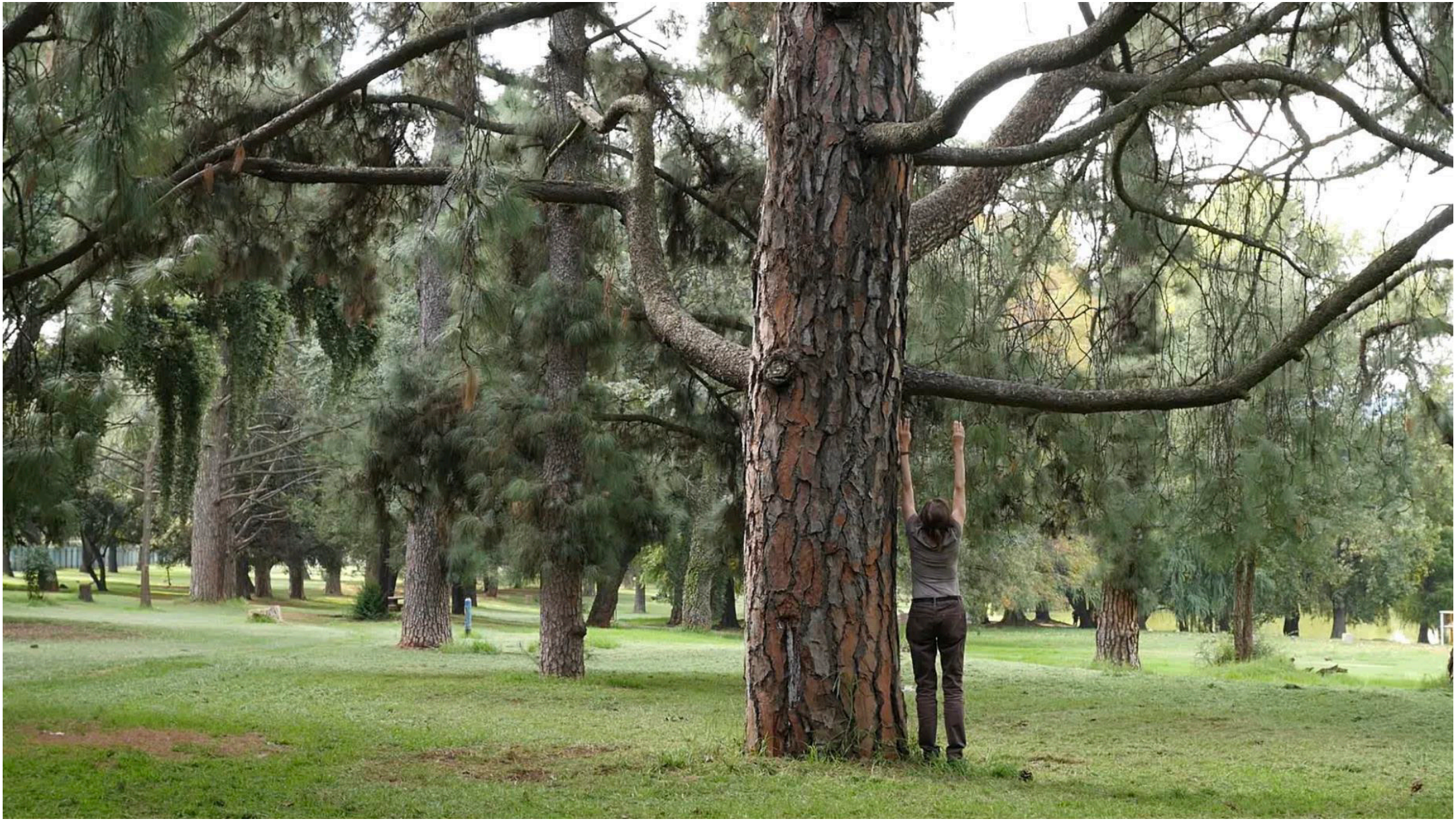
With the Sick Plane Tree

This plane tree (*Platanus x acerifolia*), another tree characteristic of many suburbs and streets in Johannesburg, growing in Rhodes Park, was exceptional due to its size, location and accessibility. The video (7 min 27 sec) was performed on 9 March 2020.



Reaching for the Pine

This exceptional-looking pine tree (*Pinus*) growing in Rhodes Park was inviting to perform with due to its seemingly low-stretching branch. The video (3 min 27 sec) was performed there on 9 March 2020.



With a Weeping Willow

This tree, a weeping willow (*Salix babylonica*) growing in Nirox Sculpture Park, is one of many that grow, hanging above the ponds there. The video (4 min 20 sec) was performed on 18 March 2020.



With Hackberry Trees I and II

These Hackberry trees (*Celtis occidentalis*), growing in Nirox Sculpture Park between the path and the shore of one of the lakes, created a stage for a group performance. The two videos (3 min 7 sec) were performed on 18 March 2020.



With Hackberry Trees I and II



With Hackberry Trees I and II

The Wits Blue Gum Tree

The Wits blue gum tree (or river red gum tree, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) is the only tree nominated as Champion Tree of South Africa that is included in this series. It is growing on the Braamfontein campus of the University of the Witwatersrand and is the same tree as the one chosen by Manola Gayatri Kumarswamy – this time performing on its own. The video (2 min) is a compilation of three small videos recorded while circling the trunk on 12 March 2020, inserted into a previous attempt on 4 March 2020.



The Dutch Oak in Nirox

This oak tree (*Quercus*), growing near the entrance to Nirox Residency, was allegedly used in old times by butchers to hang goats from. The video (4 min 31 sec) was made circling the oak during a brief residency in Nirox on 18 March 2020.



Writing With and To Trees

A letter to a small pine tree I had spent time with while in Stockholm in 2018, recorded as a voice-over text for the video created together with the tree, served as a kind of "thanks" for the collaboration, addressed to the tree afterwards. Only later, in Ulldecona, when visiting ancient olive trees there, did I try writing to a tree while posing for the camera with that tree, addressing my partner in performance in writing, there and then. This act of writing to the tree seemed like an apt attempt at focusing on the tree, instead of speaking for the tree, on behalf of the tree, or even as the tree, impersonating the tree, as I had tried in some previous sound works. Instead of trying to give voice to the tree – obviously a futile attempt – I could try to speak to the tree, in order to try to create a kind of dialogue, although how the tree would respond, I could not imagine.

When leaving for Johannesburg, I chose a small pine tree in Stockholm as a pen pal of sorts, sitting next to it and writing letters to it, as one would to an imaginary friend. I imagined I would be able to write to it from Johannesburg but quickly forgot the idea. It was writing there, with the tree, to the tree, that seemed meaningful. Recording the act of writing with a video camera turns it into a performance, and the text itself is transformed into a trace, or a piece of evidence, rather than a text with literary or scholarly ambitions. For some reason, I did not think of this practice while performing with the trees in Johannesburg and remembered it only during my time in Nirox. After writing notes after each session with the first Firethorn rhus I met, during the recording of Day with a Firethorn Rhus,[112] it seemed natural to write to – and with – the two other shrubs of the same species that I performed with the following day.

112. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433

Dear Firethorn Rhus

This small tree or shrub, a Firethorn rhus (*Searsia pyroides*) growing in Nirox Sculpture Park provided a place on which to sit. The video (20 min 15 sec) was performed on 18 March 2020. The following text, written during the performance, was recorded and added as a voice-over to a shorter version of the video, *Dear Firethorn Rhus (with text)*[113] (6 min).

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 always have 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.

113. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813

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 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!



Dear Firethorn Rhus II

This small tree or shrub, a Firethorn rhus (*Searsia pyroides*) growing in Nirox Nature Reserve, served as a partner with whom to sit. The video (20 min 15 sec) was performed on 19 March 2020. The following text written during the performance was recorded and added as a voice-over to a shorter version of the video, *Dear Firethorn Rhus II (with text)*[114] (6 min).

114. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675

Dear Firethorn Rhus (II),

I have been spending time with two of your kin in the Nirox Sculpture Park, and only today did I realise 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 realised 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!



Concluding Remarks

The sudden change in residency circumstances transformed the nature of the project with the trees in Johannesburg. Instead of considering a screening event with those who participated in the videos making up the majority of the audience, the main focus now shifted towards this publication, which could simply document some of the material that had already been made. Writing this in Helsinki, Finland, a few months later, and meeting other trees here fairly regularly, my activities in Johannesburg seem distant, like a period of intense gathering of material, an excursion of sorts.

What to do with this material, these small videos remains somewhat unclear. Here, in this publication, they "perform" as photographs, as evidence of what took place, and seem like a pertinent reminder of all the trees that were not included, and all the people whose chosen trees I never met and who, therefore, could not make it into this collection. This interruption is benign for me because now I can blame the disruption for the incomplete and unrepresentative character of this selection, consisting primarily, although not only, of white academic males. However, the selection would have been incomplete and unrepresentative anyway, although in a different manner. There would have been a few more prominent trees, like the Wonderboom fig, and a few more black or coloured colleagues among the contributors. Perhaps I would have experimented with some more ways of spending time with trees. It is very unlikely, however, that I would have completed something extremely different, but rather more variations to the approaches presented above. The trees that now form this strange collection are a tiny sample of the many, many different trees in Johannesburg and its environs, and a small sample of relationships that people can have with trees.

What is the status of these videos? Are they data for further research, to be analysed in some manner, or perhaps to be discussed in terms of the method used and its viability for wider development? Or, are they actually artistic outputs, small video works in their own right? Or, perhaps material for an installation or event, or for a publication, like this one? These videos, with or without a voice-over, are the main result of my work during the residency. What is shown here, still images from the videos and transcripts of the speeches or handwritten notes, are only documentation, evidence that references the works. They are also the natural building blocks for this publication, which is a separate kind of work, too – paradoxically, perhaps the main work, in this case.

Drafts and/or Data?

Elsewhere, I have discussed the peculiar relationship between data and output that often characterises artistic research and sometimes performance as research, too.[115] The same video can serve as data, material, remains, output, and artwork, depending on the context. In artistic research, the role of research data or material and the role of research output can be interchangeable, mixed or hybridised. For the purposes of this discussion, artistic research, practice-as-research,[116] or creative arts research,[117] can be understood as research where the making of art forms an important part of the overall process. In artistic research, the analysis, translation or interpretation of data does not always take place by

115. Arlander, 'Data, Material, Remains'.

116. Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts*.

117. Barrett and Bolt, *Material Inventions*.

linguistic means, as Brad Haseman has already indicated.[118] Rather, as Michael Schwab has emphasised, artistic research is often best disseminated in the form of expositions; that is, artistic practice is exposed as research.[119] Various forms of material-discursive practices can be involved.

My intuitive understanding of data as material would be to consider the raw footage or the unedited images to be data and to regard the edited video works as outputs. They, too, become data, however, in terms of research when I write about them. An artwork can be made simply by an artist's decision, like Duchamp's famous urinal, while a decision to exhibit something as art tends to be made by an institution or curator, as Boris Groys has pointed out.[120] If I am used to thinking, "this is art because I say it is art," can I also claim, "this is artistic research because I say it is artistic research"? Perhaps not. There are, however, many intermediate stages between data and draft. For instance, the still images seem like a traditional form of data; they document the performances with the trees. When compiled into a publication, they embody a middle position between material and work, since they are organised to be appreciated aesthetically. All of the images are included, fairly un-manipulated, and they have a certain size and are divided into groups. These choices could be considered an expositional strategy or a mode of organising data.

Since my manner of conducting artistic research is somewhat unorthodox – I tend to make art first and reflect on it in terms of research only afterwards – the artworks easily assume the position of data, when I use them as examples while writing about some theoretical issue, for example, when I wrote about Karen Barad's concept of agential cut.[121] Her ideas on agential separability are illuminating for the relationship of data and work as well. For Barad, the boundaries and properties of a phenomenon become determinate only in the enactment of an agential cut that delineates the "measured object" from the "measuring agent." In this case, the apparatus or "measuring agent,"[122] the camera on the tripod, in collaboration with the circumstances and other agents involved, including the artist, the assistant, the tree, and the person being interviewed, produces the "measured object," the "marks on bodies" or the data, in this case, the video material for the artworks. In another instance, the same data, and the same events recorded on video, form the basis for a discussion on performing with trees.[123]

What is thought of as the work or outcome will often become data later on. In some sense, artistic practice can be understood as a way of generating data. In artistic research, a situation where the artworks take on the role of data, something to be analysed and complemented with writing, rather than research results, epistemic objects in their own right, can also be criticised. If the artworks are turned into research data, rather than research outcomes, they can be analysed as the documentation of the creative process. However, this is not really artistic research in a strict sense, since somebody else could do it. Subjectivity is not always relevant, though. These artworks, for instance, are interesting exactly because they record meetings with specific trees and people, rather than my subjective experiences.

Although the role of research material and the role of research output can be interchangeable, mixed or hybridised in artistic research, this would probably be considered a problem in most forms of research. A situation where one cannot easily

118. Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research'.

119. Schwab, 'Expositions in the Research Catalogue'.

120. Groys, *Art Power*.

121. See Arlander, 'Agential Cuts and Performance as Research'.

122. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 337.

123. See, for example, Arlander, 'Behind the Back of Linnaeus'.

distinguish research data, research method and research outcome, or where these are interchangeable, would cause concern. In artistic research, it is common for the artist-researcher to mix the object, method and outcome of their research. Like physicists, artistic researchers produce the phenomena they investigate or use in their research. As Barad has indicated, what is part of the apparatus and what is part of the body being marked or measured can change from case to case and within a specific case from time to time. For Barad, there is no neat division into subjects and objects to be found in the world. Rather, an agential cut between subject and object is enacted each time anew. Similarly, a division between what is data and what is output, what is material and what is result, is enacted in each case. "Only a part of the world can be made intelligible to itself at a time, because the other part of the world has to be the part that it makes a difference to."[124]

If we consider the videos and transcribed texts to be material (instead of data, which sounds more like social science terminology), something to be worked on in the future, rather than completed outcomes to be archived, another question emerges. This question is also common in the context of artistic research: are they material for reflection, for scholarly articles (for example a discussion on artistic methods or on human relationships to trees) or something else? Or, are they material for artworks, rough sketches or drafts out of which some could be selected, perhaps re-edited and combined, and prepared for a wider display? Obviously, they could be both. Now, after a few months, I could write something more structured about the methods I used, and the ways of encountering the trees with which I experimented, which are only briefly sketched in the groupings of the trees in this publication.

The interesting experience of asking other people about their choice of tree, for instance, asking them to perform with their tree and to describe their choice of tree was new and special for me. I have never tried that before and, so far, I have not tried it afterwards. What made me experiment with such a "documentarist" and even "journalistic" strategy during my ARA residency? It was probably the need to learn, the impulse to ask for help. What seemed a really radical and challenging approach in Johannesburg – to video record and interview other people about their choice of tree – has not had a continuation in my work at home, although it felt like an important new method at the time. This approach is likely to be most suitable for individuals visiting a new place as a foreigner, and really needing other people to explain things to you in order to understand their world. It has not even occurred to me to try a similar approach with my colleagues in Helsinki. Surprisingly, however, in Helsinki I have continued with the small experiment of "becoming a tree" together with the oak tree on Galway Road. I began, during the quarantine, with a maple tree in the yard of the house where I live, resulting in *With a Maple Tree (Corona Diary)*.[125] I then repeated the experiment with an old spruce called "The Spruce of Independence" in a nearby park.[126]

In terms of more scholarly reflection, the method of writing to trees by the trees and its implications will be discussed in a separate article. The practice of visiting trees and addressing them in writing could be understood as an attempt to overcome the gap between human and plant life with the mediation of art, as suggested by Prudence

124. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 432, footnote 42.

125. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=925459

126. See the online archive https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/761327 and blog https://meetingswithtrees.com for *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*

Gibson.[127] I returned to this practice of writing to trees while sitting next to them on my brief visit to Nirox during my ARA residency, and am now exploring it further in Helsinki. Rather than invite the tree to write, to try to give the tree a voice or agency with technology, as many artists do, I try to create an "I–You" relationship by addressing the tree. This move could be seen as re-inventing an age-old poetic convention, or of resorting to a traditional narrative strategy.

Theatrical performances often include a third element between the performer and the spectator, in the form of "the character"; somebody performs as somebody else. I have tried this strategy in some site-specific monologues, although speaking as somebody else is problematic. As Patricia Vieira and others have pointed out, speaking for plants, for others, is ethically challenging.[128] There are other problems: is addressing the tree in writing actually emphasising our difference by making our relationship more fictional, rather than us simply breathing, growing and appearing together in the image space? By treating plants as persons,[129] by writing to them, rather than acknowledging the vegetal in me,[130] am I perhaps exaggerating our differences, and neglecting our joint participation in "zoe,"[131] our trans-corporeality?[132]

127. Gibson, *The Plant Contract*.

128. Vieira, Gagliano, and Ryan, *The Green Thread*.

129. Hall, *Plants as Persons*.

130. Marder, *Plant-Thinking*.

131. Braidotti, 'Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism'.

132. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.

Mixture, Immersion and Performance

One way to approach the relationship between performance and context with the help of plants is in terms of mixture and immersion. I attempted to do this in a paper titled 'Meetings with Trees and the Metaphysics of Mixture', originally proposed for the Performance as Research Working Group meeting at the IFTR conference, which was planned to take place in Galway in July 2020. When the conference was cancelled, the paper was then developed for the online event, *Continuities in Practice: A Virtual Exchange in Order to Continue the Conversation*, on 14 July 2020. With the help of that presentation, I will try to explore a continuation and counterpoint to the notion of "vegetal democracy" introduced by Marder, which I discussed in the introduction.

In his extraordinary study *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (2018), Emanuele Coccia creates a philosophy based on his knowledge of botany, with his starting point perhaps closer to Bruno Latour than Derrida.[133] Some of Coccia's ideas are particularly interesting for how we understand performances, environments and their inevitable mutual impact. In agreement with Marder, Coccia observes how "[o]ne cannot separate the plant – *neither physically nor metaphysically* – from the world that accommodates it."[134] He notes that "[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 "have modified the metaphysical structure of the world for good."[135] We know humans have transformed the planet, but it was actually plants that did it first. They have created a "world of which they are both part and content" and by their mode of being they "demonstrate that life is a rupture in the asymmetry between container and contained."[136] Coccia explains: "When there is life, the container is located in the contained (and is thus contained by it); and vice versa."[137] This is

133. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, first published in the French in 2016.

134. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 5.

135. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 10.

136. Ibid.

137. Ibid.

understandable, with the example of breathing, which "means to be immersed in a medium that penetrates us with the same intensity as we penetrate it."[138] The idea that living beings not only adapt to, but produce, the space in which they live is important on many levels, whether on a planetary or urban scale or in terms of small performances for the camera together with trees. This idea comes close to the reciprocal and responsible relationship with nature or the land, which is characteristic for many indigenous traditions, their view of the world and the role and place of humans in it.[139]

The understanding of mutual containment that Coccia describes seems relevant for performance when he writes, "In all climates, the relation between the container and the contained is constantly reversible: what is place becomes content, what is content becomes place. The medium becomes subject and the subject becomes medium."[140] According to him, "climate presupposes this constant topological inversion, this oscillation that undoes the border between subject and environment."[141] The reversibility of place and content is particularly evident in site-specific performances, and is probably the case also in performances that think of themselves as independent of context.

The oscillation or undoing of the border between subject and environment brings Coccia to the idea of "mixture." "Mixture is what defines the state of fluidity," he writes.[142] "The structure of universal circulation is fluid, the place where everything comes into contact with everything else and comes to mix with it without losing its form and its own substance."[143] He understands plant photosynthesis as "a cosmic process of fluidification of the universe,"[144] or "one of the movements through which the fluid of the world constitutes itself: what allows the world to breathe and keeps it in a state of dynamic tension."[145] According to Coccia "[t]o breathe means to be plunged into a medium that penetrates us in the same way and with the same intensity as we penetrate it."[146] This is a form of immersion, and "[t]he plant, then, is a paradigm of immersion."[147]

Immersion, a term much used in contemporary performance, is for Coccia another word for the relationship of container and contained, which "is first of all an action of mutual compenetration between subject and environment, body and space, life and medium."[148] This means that "[s]ubject and environment act on each other and define themselves starting from this reciprocal action."[149] Or, in other words, "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."[150] As an example of immersion, he uses the experience of swimming and explains immersion as a "radical identity of being and doing" stating explicitly: "One cannot *exist* in a fluid space without modifying, by this very fact, the reality and form of the environment that surrounds us."[151]

This proposal has radical implications for all our actions, including performances. If we think of performances as systems where everything is inter-dependent, where "the smallest change to one factor of theatrical performance in some way, however minutely, will effect change in all the rest"[152] we could think of a performance as a fluid space as well. The mutual compenetration of subject and environment, or life and medium, which Coccia emphasises, has practical relevance. It is relevant not only

138. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*,

139. See, for example, Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

140. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 27.

141. Ibid.

142. Ibid.

143. Ibid.

144. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 37.

145. Ibid.

146. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 53.

147. Ibid.

148. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 37.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid.

151. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 37–38.

152. Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology*, 24.

within a performance but in terms of performance and its environment, in the sense that performances have consequences for their environment and have an impact on the fluid space they exist in, whether we intend it or not.

Living beings are making worlds. Vegetation is perhaps the best demonstration of the constant and ongoing transformation of the environment. "The existence of plants is, by itself, a global modification of the cosmic environment, because... 'To be' means for them, to make world [faire monde]."[153] Consequently, Coccia emphasises "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."[154] Or, to put it in other words, "[e]very organism is the invention of a way of producing the world..."[155] In making performances, we are conditioned by and dependent on the world, and the circumstances in which we perform. And we are simultaneously producing those worlds and those circumstances on an imaginary level, imagining them into existence, quite literally, in the places where we perform our actions with the beings that we change by our exchanges with them. Considering this, where to perform, with whom and in what manner, becomes a huge decision.

Moreover, there is no way to enclose oneself into an inspiring experimental laboratory, disregarding the rest of the world. According to Coccia, there are no separate niches or life-worlds that could keep us seemingly isolated from others, because "[b]eing in the world means to exercise influence especially outside one's own space, outside one's own habitat, outside one's own niche."[156] According to him "the totality of the world one lives in... is and will always be infested by others."[157] Thus, "the world is by definition the life of others: the ensemble of other living beings."[158] In this sense, we perform for, with, and on each other, regardless of whatever we do.

"To recognize that the world is a space of immersion," Coccia writes, means "that there are no real or stable frontiers."[159] Again, he uses breathing as an example: "The air we breathe is not a purely geological or mineral reality /--/ but rather the breath of other living beings. It is a by-product of 'the lives of others'."[160] Through the breath, our dependence on vegetation becomes obvious, in that we cannot survive without the oxygen they produce; "every day we feed off the gaseous excretions of plants. We could not live but off the life of others."[161] Immersion can be understood as a result of "the fact that life is always its own environment and that, because of this, it circulates from body to body, from subject to subject, from place to place."[162]

According to Coccia, immersion does not, however, mean imagining only one substrate. "The cosmos – that is, nature – is not the foundation of things, it is their mixture, their breathing, the movement that animates their interpenetration."[163] And such interpenetration, "a relationship of radical and absolute interiority... nullifies any distinction between container and contained."[164] The counterintuitive "fact of *being contained in something* coexists with the fact of containing this same thing. The container is also the content of what it contains. This identity is not logical, it is topological and dynamic."[165] For Coccia, the life of plants "is the clearest proof that the world is mixture and that every being of the world... is in the world with the same intensity with which the world is in it."[166] He rejects simplified notions like "environment" because "the living being is an

153. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 38.

154. Ibid.

155. Ibid.

156. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 43.

157. Ibid.

158. Ibid.

159. Ibid.

160. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 47.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

163. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 70.

164. Ibid.

165. Ibid.

166. Coccia, T*he Life of Plants*, 71.

environment for the world in the same way in which the remaining things of the world are the environment of the living individual. Influence always goes in both directions."[167]

"If the world is in all its beings, this means that every being is capable of radically transforming the world,"[168] Coccia writes. "Universal mixture embodies the fact that the world is constantly exposed to the transformation brought about by its components."[169] Humans are not the only ones incessantly changing the world. "One need not wait for the Anthropocene to encounter this paradox: it was the plants that, millions of years ago, transformed the world by producing the conditions of possibility of animal life."[170] Coccia is critical of the term "Anthropocene" because it "transforms what defines the very existence of the world into a single action, historical and negative," and "makes the human being an extranatural cause."[171] "If every mind [*esprit*] makes the world," he notes, "this is because each act of breath is not just the simple survival of the animal in us, but the form and consistency of the world of which we are the pulse."[172]

Although Coccia's ideas like immersion, mixture and mutual implication of container and contained, are especially pertinent for the practice of performing with plants, they have relevance for all kinds of performance practices as well as performance as research. By creating performances, we are simultaneously creating the conditions for other beings to perform. And those other beings, in turn, are creating not only the conditions for our performances to take place, and the world we are immersed in, but literally creating us as living beings. In some sense, this idea is interesting when extended to the imaginary, with which most performances are engaged in some manner. By imagining worlds and sharing our imaginings, we are simultaneously creating the conditions for other beings to imagine worlds. If this is the case, not only do the performances we create have impact, but also those we imagine.

When performing with a tree, I am immersed in, enjoying and benefiting from the world or microclimate created by that specific tree. I am also contributing to that specific part of the world with my own breath and sweat, and perhaps my thoughts as well. There are trans-corporeal exchanges and changes taking place without my awareness of them.

Decolonising our Relationship with Nature

A question I worked with before my visit to Johannesburg acquired new relevance and urgency there: could expanding the idea of who or what can perform assist in decolonising our relationship to the environment, and to everything else around us, including trees?

In one of her last texts, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature' (2003), Plumwood analyses the logical structure of colonial, anthropocentric and Eurocentric relationships. She describes the Eurocentric colonial system as "one of hegemony – a system of power relations in which the interests of the dominant party were disguised as universal and mutual, but in which the colonizer actually prospered at the expense of the colonized."[173] Plumwood draws on her experience from both sides of the colonising relationships and notes "that many of us experience them from both sides and that they can mislead, distort and impoverish both the colonized and the centre – not just the obvious losers."[174] This

167. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 72.

168. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 71.

169. Ibid.

170. Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, 71.

171. Coccia, *The Life of Plant*s, 72.

172. Ibid.

173. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 51.

174. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 52.

is something I can relate to as a Finn, a Finnish Swede, and a European, and not only in relation to trees.

Plumwood notes that "the concept of colonization can be applied directly to non-human nature itself, and that the relationship between [certain groups of] humans... and the more-than-human world might be... characterized as one of colonization."[175] She reminds us how "the sphere of 'nature' has, in the past, been taken to include what are thought of as less ideal more primitive forms of the human," like women and "supposedly 'backward' or 'primitive' people, who were seen as exemplifying an earlier and more animal stage of human development."[176] Progress has meant "the progressive overcoming, or control of, this 'barbarian' non-human or semi-human sphere by the rational sphere of European culture and 'modernity'."[177] According to Plumwood, the "Eurocentric form of anthropocentrism draws upon and parallels Eurocentric imperialism in its logical structure" because it sees "the human sphere as beyond or outside the sphere of 'nature,' construes ethics as confined to the human (allowing the nonhuman sphere to be treated instrumentally)," and "treats non-human *difference* as inferiority."[178] She further explains how "[t]he colonization of nature... relies upon a range of conceptual strategies that are employed also within the human sphere," such as a "moral dualism, involving a major gulf between the 'One' and the 'Other' that cannot be bridged or crossed."[179]

Further, Plumwood provides an account of some of the mechanisms that characterise both colonial and anthropocentric approaches to the Other. These include a strong focus on dualism, exaggerating differences and denying commonality, as well as homogenising the Other. One mechanism is hyper-separation or radical exclusion: "The function of hyper-separation is to mark out the Other for separate and inferior treatment," she writes.[180] Thus, "from an anthropocentric standpoint, nature is a hyper-separate lower order, lacking any real continuity with the human."[181] According to Plumwood, such a perspective "stresses heavily those features that make humans different from nature and animals, rather than those we share with them."[182] Another mechanism is homogenisation or stereotyping, seeing the Other "not [as] an individual, but a member of a class stereotyped as interchangeable, replaceable, all alike – that is, as homogenous."[183] Consequently, "[a]nthropocentric culture conceives of nature and animals as all alike in their lack of consciousness, which is assumed to be exclusive to the human."[184] Plumwood summarises: "These two features of human/nature dualism – radical exclusion and homogenization – work together to produce, in anthropocentric culture, a polarized understanding in which the human and non-human spheres correspond to two quite different substances or orders of being in the world."[185]

Plumwood then proposes ways to overcome the effects of these mechanisms. To counter the "dynamic of 'us-them' polarization," she suggests that "it is necessary to acknowledge and reclaim continuity and overlap between the polarized groups, as well as internal diversity within them."[186] Additionally, to counter the "dynamic of denial, assimilation and instrumentalization requires," she adds, "recognition of the Other's difference, independence and agency."[187] This means "a double movement or gesture of affirming kinship and also affirming the Other's difference, as an independent presence to be engaged with on its own terms."[188] She maintains that a "re-conception of nature in

175. Ibid.

176. Ibid.

177. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 52–53.

178. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 53.

179. Ibid.

180. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 54.

181. Ibid.

182. Ibid.

183. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 55.

184. Ibid.

185. Ibid.

186. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 60.

187. Ibid.

188. Ibid.

agentic terms" is "perhaps the most important aspect of moving to an alternative ethical framework."[189] To counteract "backgrounding and denial," activists try to puncture the contemporary illusion of human independence, but "countering a hegemonic dualism, such as between nature and culture presents many traps," like a mere value reversal, idealising "pure nature" or "wilderness," she explains, which actually leaves the dichotomy in place.[190]

In terms of my own practice, even though I try to make acquaintance with trees and intellectually know that I depend on them and their kind, I am, to some extent, the result of the material-discursive practices of a colonial legacy, which sees humans as the only rational species, the only real subjectivities and agents in the world, whereas trees, and everything else is "nature," a background substratum that is there to be exploited, or to provide me with a healthy "forest-bathing experience," and perhaps material for... video works.

In *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (2018) by Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh,[191] Mignolo criticises the use of the concept of "nature," and presents the idea of nature as one of the three pillars of the colonial matrix, together with racism and sexism. According to Mignolo, "nature and culture are two Western fictions /--/ How to get out of them is a decolonial question."[192] Further, Mignolo states that "Western imperial subjects secured themselves and their descendants as the superior subspecies" and "invented... the idea of *nature* to separate their bodies from all living ... organisms on the planet."[193] He also notes that contemporary ideas of the posthuman and posthumanism carry the weight of this legacy.[194]

"Nature doesn't exist, or it exists as an ontological fiction,"[195] Mignolo states. "There is no such concept in... (non-Western) languages /--/ because there was no conceptualization corresponding to what Europeans understood as nature."[196] In South American "Indigenous cosmologies... there is no such divide between *nature* and *culture*, a misleading formula, for nature is a cultural concept" and "current urgencies among Western scholars and intellectuals of moving 'beyond nature and culture' is a regional and provincial Western urgency. It is welcome of course, but it is not universal."[197] He reminds us of "the powerful resurgence of Indigenous knowledges, philosophies of life, and ways of helping the world, to realise how vicious and devilish the concept of nature and its proxy, natural resources" and more recently human resources "was and continues to be."[198] For example, "[i]n the South American Andes *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) was always invoked" in "confronting the destruction of nature and its recent version, *the environment*, by transnational corporations exploiting and extracting *natural resources*."[199]

For Mignolo, "[d]ecolonial thinking is akin to non-modern ways of thinking grounded on cosmologies of *complementary dualities* (and/and) rather than *dichotomies* or *contradictory dualities* (either/or)."[200] In Andean philosophy, for example, there is an understanding of duality as complementarity, resembling the Chinese yin and yang, Mignolo explains: "[T]hey have in common the acknowledgement that there cannot be A without its opposite B. Once you acknowledge that these entities are inseparable ... you have at least two options."[201] Further, "If you try to eliminate and control the opposite,

189. Ibid.

190. Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature', 61.

191. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

192. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 160.

193. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 153–154.

194. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 154.

195. Mignolo and Walsh, On Decoloniality, 158.

196. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 159.

197. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 164.

198. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 159.

199. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 163.

200. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 155.

201. Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 160.

you enter the realm of war; if you seek harmony and balance, you enter the realm of struggle, weaving relations (convivencia, vincularidad) with all that exists" such as "rocks and mountains; spirits and plants; plants and mountains that are spirits; animals who do not speak Kechua, Hebrew, Latin or any other of the known languages; and animals who do speak one or more languages."[202]

By sitting in a tree or standing next to it I am not communicating with the tree in any detailed way. Admittedly, it would be a struggle if I would really try to understand the trees that I encounter, and if we really tried to understand each other. However, I am trying to establish a relationship, some form of "vincularidad," perhaps. I am not thinking of trees as spirits or powers, however, as my ancestors might have done. Perhaps I am disrespectful and colonising when forcing the trees to perform with me, and asking them to contribute to my artwork without any recompense?

In another recent study, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (2017), T.J. Demos incorporates art into the debate and writes: "I'm convinced that there is nothing more important, timely and urgent to consider as our present ecological crises, and in this regard, we can only do so by starting from our bases in our respective fields",[203] which for him means art history. "Under current forms of governance," he notes, "our relation to the environment threatens our coming existence, where not only nature is colonized but also our very future, a colonization that we must all struggle to resist."[204]

Unlike Mignolo, Demos is consciously speaking of and for nature. "To decolonize nature represents a doubtlessly ambitious and manifold project, with artists, activists, and creative practitioners (in addition to scientists, policy makers, and politicians) involved at every stage,"[205] he explains. "Beyond the critical analysis of corporate practice and the international framework of trade policies that privilege economy over environment," he adds, "we also need to decolonize our conceptualization of nature in properly political ways."[206] Demos admits that the conventional definition of nature, "positioned as an ahistoric monolith in a separate realm apart from the human" appears "faulty for its basis in ontological objectification and dualistic thinking" and serves as "the conceptual platform for extractivist practice."[207] Yet, for Demos, "rejecting the term nature is not an option," even while he agrees "with efforts geared towards its conceptual reorientation."[208]

Furthermore, Demos stresses that "decolonizing nature entails transcending human-centred exceptionalism, no longer placing ourselves at the centre of the universe and viewing nature as a source of endless bounty."[209] He notes how current intellectual efforts and various approaches to posthumanism and new materialism represent "a paradigm shift in the humanities, constitutionally preoccupied... with the human."[210] He maintains that "art figures as a central platform... linking with further philosophical inquiry and conceptual experimentation... exploring, for instance... what 'zoe-egalitarianism' would mean."[211] For Demos, however, "it is necessary to bring these formations into relation with key accounts of political and social ecology... if they are to gain critical use value."[212] He wants to focus on "what Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha call 'the environmentalism of the poor'... [in order to] avoid continuing the Global North's

202. Ibid.

203. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 29.

204. Ibid.

205. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 16.

206. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 18.

207. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 20.

208. Ibid.

209. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 19.

210. Ibid.

211. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 20.

212. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 21.

legacy of provincialism, prejudice, and privilege regarding ecology" which they call "an 'environmentalism of affluence'."[213] For Demos, this includes acknowledging the views of indigenous traditions as forerunners. "Post-anthropocentric philosophy is not a recent discovery, but rather connects – whether intentionally or not – to long-standing Indigenous views of nature as a pluriverse of agents," he adds.[214]

Demos notes the need for "new methodologies to acknowledge the voices of historically oppressed peoples, which stand to strengthen the basis of ethico-political solidarity around ecological concerns by joining with current struggles for cultural and environmental survival against corporate globalization."[215] Interestingly, he seems to have great confidence in the transformative power of art: "I am convinced that art, given its long histories of experimentation, imaginative invention, and radical thinking, can play a central transformative role here."[216] In his view, art could initiate not only perceptual but "philosophical shifts, offering new ways of comprehending ourselves and our relation to the world differently than the destructive traditions of colonizing nature."[217]

I wish I could be equally convinced of the power of art. However, in resisting the colonisation of the future, and doing so by starting from our bases in our respective fields, to perform with trees, in one way or another, is nevertheless, at least, a start.

213. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 22.

214. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 23.

215. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 23–24.

216. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 18.

217. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 18–19.

Some Afterthoughts

These thoughts on decolonising our relationship with nature acquired new meaning in the context of my ARA residency in Johannesburg, where decolonisation on a social and political level is a pressing issue. The first wall painting that caught my eye on the Wits main campus was a huge tree in the form of a fist – a tree as a fist and a fist as a tree – with the slogan "climate justice is social justice." Since I was aware of the tendency for "environmental issues" to be regarded as a pastime for the privileged, usually elderly white people (like myself), I was worried that my interest in trees might be controversial in the wrong way. I did not want to support conservation and preservation uncritically, in tension with demands for access to green areas for everybody, and for uprooting non-indigenous trees as reminders of a colonial legacy, or related debates taking place. When the English plane trees in many areas of Northern Johannesburg, including Parkview, the suburb where I stayed, affected with PSHB (or Polyphagous Spot Hole Borers) started dying, the question of what trees to replace them with, and whether to replace them with any trees at all, is not only a matter of urban planning and gardening but a political issue. As a visitor, I have no real understanding of these debates, but I am forced to realise that most of the arboreal beauty of the city is created at the cost of human exploitation and suffering. Fortunately, it seems that people working for social justice are increasingly emphasising the fact that such justice includes a healthy environment for all, with trees as an important aspect, especially in large cities. However, to think beyond that, beyond human wellbeing, and consider the rights of trees, for instance, in a situation of acute human suffering, is perhaps more difficult. Currently, partly as a result of the pandemic, however, more and more humans have come to realise, what Donna Haraway,[218] Anna

218. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

Tsing,[219] and others have said for years – that life is a complicated and vulnerable sphere of collaborative effort, and includes all kinds of entities, like humans, viruses, borers and trees. And, in some way, we have to try to negotiate and maintain that sphere on this "damaged planet."

During my stay in Johannesburg, which this publication documents, I very quickly realised I had a lot to learn. I am grateful for the experience, and also for the possibility of sharing it here, fairly informally, with you, dear reader. In what manner all the fascinating trees I met in Johannesburg, either by bumping into them by myself or by being introduced to them by generous colleagues, will come to figure in future works or texts, remains to be seen. Whether these materials will at some point be developed into a more formal contribution to the field of performance as research, and perhaps even to the area of critical plant studies, also remains a question for the future. For now, this material has to stand on its own as what it is – material, graciously shared with me by some extraordinary generous and friendly people and trees. Meanwhile, the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* is well underway. It seems like the seemingly unremarkable trees, like the small Firethorn rhus, often turn out to be the most inspiring ones and the ones that will continue as artworks with a life of their own. Even if nothing else would come out of our meetings, beyond this publication and the videos online, the experiences themselves have been remarkable and inspiring, and the significance of that is not to be underestimated in these uncertain days.

219. Tsing et al., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*.

Links and References

Project Websites

- Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees (archive on the Research Catalogue)
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/761327
- Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees (project website and blog)
https://meetingswithtrees.com/

Links to videos online, in the order presented in the text

- *With the Oak on Galway Road*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=824645
- *Day with the Firethorn Rhus*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822433
- *Myer's Oak*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=801463
- *Samuel's Oak*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=813713
- *Christo's Cabbage Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=814055
- *Donald's Searsia*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=817426
- *Tina's Palm Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=817900
- *Shilongane's Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=820009
- *Bushi's Peach Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=820001
- *Manola's Eucalyptus Gum Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=821299
- *In the Ombú Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=801843
- *In the Cork Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=813714
- *In the Karee Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=813716
- *In the Purple Leaf Acacia I and II*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=813715
- *In the River Bushwillow*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=815789
- *With the Sick Plane Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=818726
- *Reaching for the Pine*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=818725
- *With the Weeping Willow*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822812
- *With Hackberry Trees I and II*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822814
- *The Wits Blue Gum Tree*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=820403
- *The Dutch Oak in Nirox*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823673
- *Dear Firethorn Rhus*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=822813
- *Dear Firethorn Rhus II*
https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=823675

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