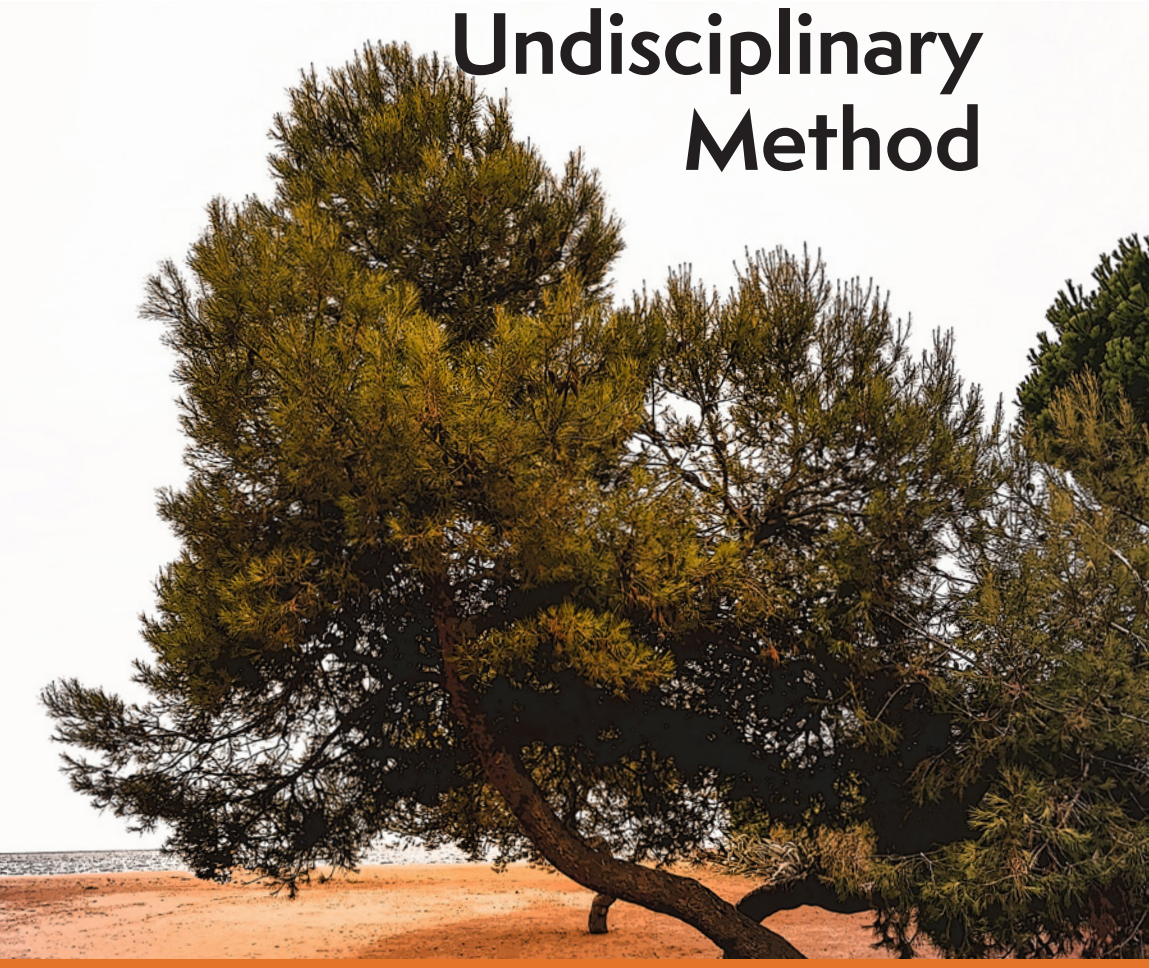
Annette Arlander

Pondering with Örö Pines – Talking with Trees as an Undisciplinary Method



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ABSTRACT

This text presents talking with trees as a method of generating material for artistic and other research purposes based on conversations with pine trees recorded in May 2022 on Örö Island in southwestern Finland. Addressing one pine tree a day for six consecutive days as part of the project Pondering with Pines was an experiment that resulted in video works and podcast episodes. The perspective was human centred and subjective while also subjectifying the trees. In this context, the focus is on talking with trees as an undisciplinary method adaptable to other circumstances.

KEYWORDS

trees, pine trees, conversation, undisciplinary method, artistic research, performance

rees have a special position in the human relationship to vegetation, and within critical plant studies or plant humanities. Trees are linked to truth,[1] they are listened to,[2] they are watching us,[3] they serve to connect literary scholars,[4] and more. Some recent publications focus on plants as inspiration for plays,[5] art and thought more broadly,[6] while others focus on specific trees, like pines,[7] which are the

1 David Wood, *Thinking Plant Animal Human: Encounters with Communities of Difference* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. 35–49.

2 Michael Marder, 'To hear plants speak', in M. Gagliano, J.C. Ryan and P. Vieira (eds), *The Language of Plants - Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp.103–25.

3 Natasha Myers, 'Are the trees watching us?' *Spike Art Magazine* #65 (Autumn 2020): https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/?q=articles/qa-natasha-myers

4 Carmen Concilio and Natalia Fargione (eds), *Trees in Literature and the Arts: Humanarboreal Perspectives in the Anthropocene (*Lanham; Boulder, New York; London: Lexington Books, 2021).

5 Giovanni Aloi (ed.), *Estado Vegetal – Performance and Plant-Thinking* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2023)

6 Giovanni Aloi and Michael Marder (eds), *Vegetal Entwinements in Philosophy and Art: A Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023).

7 Robin Wall Kimmerer, 'White pine'. In J.C. Ryan, P. Vieira and M. Gagliano (eds), *The Minds of Plants. Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (Santa Fe; London: Synergetic Press, 2021), pp. 423–31.

main collaborators in this text. And talking with trees is of course nothing new for philosophers.[8] The following account of talking with pine trees could be described as an open-ended experiment, a task-based performance or an example of fieldwork depending on context. It is here presented as a possible interdisciplinary or even undisciplinary[9] method for generating ideas, material or data together with pine trees, in contact and conversation with them, nearby.[10] Undisciplinary here means unlinked to specific disciplines like interdisciplinary, or to professional knowledges beyond the academy like transdisciplinary, with a possible link to the undisciplined as befits artistic research, implying that the method could be used in various contexts and for a variety of purposes.

The main problem of the project Pondering with Pines can be summarised as 'how to develop ways of recognizing and engaging with the subjectivity of life forms such as trees, which we tend to consider as wholly "other"?'[11] The artistic aim is linked to the wish of Ursula Le Guin 'to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us'[12] and the task, stressed by Amitav Ghosh 'of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans /--/ a task that is at once aesthetic and political /--/ now freighted with the most pressing moral urgency.'[13] The practice did not lean on literary tools, however, but the real-time, real-body, real-effort ethos of 'orthodox' performance art. The artistic exploration was not aimed as a contribution to critical plant studies or plant humanities, while this text now hopes to provide some material for discussion in that context. What would be a pine's perspec-

8 See, for example, Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1937); Erazim Kohák, 'Speaking to trees', *Critical Review* 6 (1993): 317–88.

9 The term was used by curator Taru Elfving in a talk at a post doc seminar in University of the Arts, Helsinki.

10 Nancy N. Chen, 'Speaking nearby: A conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha', *Visual Anthropology Review* **8** (1) (1992): 82–91.

11 See project presentation: https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/pondering-with-pines/

12 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Deep in admiration', in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 15–21.

13 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London: John Murray, 2021), p. 204.

tive? Is it not sheer human arrogance to believe one could simply adopt a pine's view and abandon one's own?

Despite being undisciplinary, this project was undertaken in the context of artistic research,[14] performance as research,[15] and related to practice-based research in a literal sense; the artistic experiments serve as the starting point, rather than a summary of previous research, as is customary in humanities. Like most of my scholarly publications, this text uses an artistic project as material to reflect upon a topic afterwards. For those not familiar with artistic research, the process often resembles action research, where practical work and scholarly reflection alternate, and influence the next stage. The use of personal experiences and first-person narration resembles autoethnographic accounts, although this text is not situated within that tradition and does not contribute to knowledge of life in the archipelago or forest management in national parks in Finland, to mention a few possible contexts. The text is written from a first-person perspective as is customary in artistic research and all research that honours the feminist legacy of situated knowing.[16] The artistic exploration was undertaken without articulated research question or hypothesis beyond the general problem 'how to recognize and engage with the subjectivity of pine trees' and, although influenced by previous experiments by the author,[17] with only a vague working question 'could this be done?' And yes, it could be done. Now, in the context of this text, the interesting question is, what could it lead to? Could this way of working be developed into an undisciplinary method used by others in other fields?

14 Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2012).

15 Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter (eds), *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research. Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009); Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude and Ben Spatz (eds), *Performance as Research: Knowledge, Methods, Impact* (London; New York: Routledge, 2018).

16 See, for example, Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* **14** (3) (1988): 575–99.

17 Beginning with Annette Arlander, 'Performing with trees: Landscape and artistic research', in John Freeman (ed.), *Blood, Sweat & Theory – Research through Practice in Performance* (Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2010), pp. 158–76.

The material produced was published as artistic outputs in the form of video works[18] and podcast episodes,[19] with an emphasis on real-time documents as evidence, rather than polished extracts for professional use. Here, however, the same material serves as texts, which are abbreviated and edited to be more readable. Besides sharing the topics of the conversations with the pines, the texts present the working method, suggesting that it might be developed for other purposes. By talking to the pines next to and in physical contact with them, the trees can have a direct impact on the conversation or text that is generated in their presence. The more the material is polished afterwards, the more human dominance takes over, inevitably. I have discussed the idea of addressing trees, speaking to trees rather than as trees, for trees or on behalf of trees, elsewhere,[20] here only noting that the problem of speaking for others[21] and the challenge in speaking nearby another[22] is even more difficult with such others as pines.

Regardless of pines being the main reason for and the key collaborators in the project, this text is not about pines, but rather about an attempt at including them. Pines are very ancient trees; they had diversified into two groups by the end of the Mesozoic period. Today there are 111 species of pines, which have adapted to life in a wide variety of circumstances from the Arctic to the tropics.[23] Although they are of the same species (*Pinus sylvestris*), the pine trees growing in the southwestern archipelago differ from the pines forming most of the forests in Finland, being small and often bent into sculptural forms by the wind. I had the opportunity to visit

18 See videos and transcripts in the Research Catalogue by Annette Arlander, 'Pondering with Örö Pines' (2022): https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1634001

19 See Annette Arlander, *Talking with Trees*, on SoundCloud, playlist 'Pondering with Örö Pines' (2022): https://soundcloud.com/user-90370389/sets/pondering-with-oeroe-pines

20 Annette Arlander, 'Writing with a pine: Addressing a tree as audience', *Näyttämö ja Tutkimus [Stage and research]* 9 (2023): 103–20. https://journal.fi/teats/article/view/127615

21 Linda Alcoff, 'The problem of speaking for others', *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–1992): 5–32.

22 Chen, 'Speaking nearby'.

23 David M. Richardson and Philip W. Rundel, 'Ecology and biogeography of *Pinus:* An introduction', in Richardson (ed.), *Ecology and Biogeography of* Pinus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1998]), pp. 3–44.

some of them on Örö Island through the Öres residency[24] for a week in May (13–18 May 2022) and to conduct an artistic experiment of meeting a pine a day there for six consecutive days. I had performed with some pines on the island before, writing letters to them[25] and posing with them as part of my previous project, Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees.[26] Now, working on the project Pondering with Pines,[27] I described the task I took on in a blog post at the end of the week: 'I made an experiment to meet or make acquaintance with one pine every day, and to record a video and an improvised conversation with that pine.'[28] All the videos and the original transcribed texts were uploaded on the Research Catalogue, an international database for artistic research.[29] Each conversation was made into an episode on the podcast *Talking with Trees* and they form a playlist, Pondering with Örö Pines.[30] The conversations are in the following presented abbreviated and edited, with new material added only between the texts or as footnotes. Still images from the videos show the pines, their remarkable forms and their immediate environment to remind the reader of their contribution to the conversation, which is easily lost with a focus on text. A word of warning: these conversations with pine trees were undertaken from a human perspective, not from the perspective of the pines. The talks were improvised in the moment, and although here edited, nevertheless 'spoken', in broken English. A reader uninterested in the demonstration aspect can skim through the texts and jump to the concluding remarks. For the curious reader the texts can hopefully provide a sense of the recorded conversations with the pine trees and demonstrate the usefulness as well as the limits of the method.

To substantiate the claim that talking to trees by the trees could be an undisciplinary method for generating ideas, material or data together

24 Öres: https://www.ores.fi

25 See, for example, Arlander, 'Writing with a pine', pp. 103–20.

26 Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees: https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/meetings-with-remarkable-and-unremarkable-trees/

27 Pondering with Pines: https://www.uniarts.fi/en/projects/pondering-with-pines/

28 Annette Arlander, 'Some Örö Pines' (2022): https://ponderingwithpines.com/2022/05/19/some-oro-pines/

29 Arlander, 'Pondering with Örö Pines': https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1634001

30 Arlander, 'Pondering with Örö Pines': https://soundcloud.com/user-90370389/sets/pondering-with-oeroe-pines

with trees, in contact and conversation with them, I will first try to articulate in what ways my pine collaborators contributed to the work. The pines determined the site and place, the position of the performer, partly the placement of the camera and thus the framing of the image. They provided the visual content of the image, although a human being is easily foregrounded even when only partly visible. The pines influenced the sound by providing material for the wind to play with. They also served as shelter from the wind when I tried to protect the microphone. The pines offered surfaces to touch and odours to smell, influencing the mood of the conversation in subtle, sensual ways. Most importantly, they triggered the topics to be discussed, both directly through their form and mode of growing and indirectly through the volatile chemicals they emit, through our shared breathing, and through other trans-corporeal[31] exchanges taking place between us. In their diversity within the same species, the pines reminded me to regard them as individuals or individual collectives. With their way of reacting to calamities, like trunks broken in winter storms, by continuing to grow from where they landed, the pines provided an eloquent model of resilience. They contributed also by their legacy as a species, the way they have shaped the landscape in the country and by evoking the cultural, in Finland often national-romantic, landscapes they have participated in producing. Not to forget the very substantial contribution they make on an industrial scale to the economy of the country. To put it brutally: no pines, no forestry, no state subsidies, no artist grants, and no national parks, like the one in Örö. The ways that the pines contributed to this experiment can be summarised as 1) contributing to the images, 2) contributing to the conversations, and 3) contributing to the conditions for the work.

This first conversation with the first pine tree introduces the site, the island of Örö, which I have also described elsewhere.[32] The conversation is included here almost in full, only a section where I describe how I found the tree and my surprise at not noticing it before is removed.

31 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

32 Arlander, 'Writing with a pine', pp. 103–120; and Arlander, 'Trees as experts in site-specificity', in Victoria Hunter and Cathy Turner (eds), *Routledge Companion to Site-Specific Performance* (forthcoming).

FIGURE 1.
Pondering with Örö Pines (1), video still.
Source: Author.

13 May 2022

'Kära tall eller kära fura'. Actually, I should say dear pine; I want to address you in English although it might be more natural to speak Swedish with you, but since it is not so natural to talk to you anyway, I might as well speak English. /--/
Because you are growing inland, you are not bent and twisted like many of the pines on the shore. On the contrary, you are very handsome, tall and quite thick, so you must be ancient. You have met the Russians when they were here, probably. And then the Finnish Army and now all the tourists.[33] And you have the good luck of living in a national park now,[34] so there is a great likelihood that you can live your life to the full. I know the forest department is reducing some of the pines by the shore, strangling them, so to speak, letting them die slowly by taking away the bark around the trunk[35], in order to maintain the landscape more

33 Visit Örö: https://www.visitoro.fi/en/

34 Örö national park: https://www.nationalparks.fi/oro

35 See, for example, Harry Pepper, 'Girdling, constriction and ringbarking', *Trees in Focus. Arboricultural Practice Notes* 13 (2008): https://www.trees.org.uk/Help-Advice/Tree-Advice-Trust-Legacy/Arb-Practice-Notes

open. Because, dear pine, you are really a very strong and in some sense invasive species. Of course, you are not an invasive species here, this is your home. Except that, when the land was rising, there were no forests on the islands to begin with, but now, you are not coming from abroad. Well, that is a good question. Everybody has come from abroad at some point, because earlier there was only ice here. Anyway, when you grow, you proliferate in such numbers that you prevent other species from surviving, especially those plants that need more open vistas and more sun. You are very resilient, as they say nowadays, because you can survive in quite harsh circumstances, not only the wind and the cold here, but the soil ... There is not much soil on the cliffs, on the rocks and on the shore. Except that you produce a soil of sorts, through your needles and pine cones when they fall to the ground. Well, I am talking nonsense with you, or something that is trivial knowledge for humans. And for you even more trivial, because it is knowledge of pines from a human perspective.

How could I sensitise myself to be able to listen to you, to take in your perspective? That is a task. If I listen, I don't hear you. I hear the sea, the wind and the sea; sometimes when the wind is strong I can hear the wind in the pines too, but not now. I wonder if you can hear the sea as well. Some plants clearly can hear, so why not? It would be quite amazing if you could hear my speech, not necessarily understand what I am saying, but if you could hear my voice. And if you could sense that I am wishing you well, that I am not trying to hurt you. I am not going to eat your bark or dig small holes into your wood, that then make it difficult for you to thrive. Although in Finland people used to make bread of you, when there were bad years, when the crop was freezing. There is a part of your bark, between your wood and your bark, a part that can be collected and dried and made into a flour and added to wheat or rye, or oats or barley, half and half or something like that[36]. I have never tasted that kind of bread. And they say that it is not very good for you, that it makes you sick, unless you prepare it in the right way. But it helped people to survive, or at least they tried to survive by that when there were hunger years.[37]

36 For bark bread described as a historical practice, see June Pelo, 'Bark bread', *Swedish Finn Historical Society* (2023): https://www.swedishfinnhistoricalsociety.org/bark-bread/; and, as a contemporary development, Rachel Proby, 'Eating tree bark – treelicious or barking mad?' *UPM Biofore beyond fossils* (2020): https://www.upm.com/articles/forest/20/eating-tree-bark-treelicious-or-barking-mad/

37 Andrew Newby, 'Finland's Great Famine 1856–68', *Finland's "Great Hunger Years" Memorials* (2023): https://katovuodet1860.wordpress.com/2023/05/19/finlands-great-famine-1856-68/

> Well, if you are privileged in living in this national park, opposed to most of your relatives in Finland, which are living on plantations and will be cut down before they reach old age, I must say I am privileged too, to live in this time, when there is such abundance in this country. Right now, it does not feel like a privilege because there is war in Europe, and a lot of discussions about military alliances and nuclear weapons, horrible, not suicidal but 'omnicidal' weapons as somebody called them. But still, compared to ancient times when there was always war, and there was also famine. Now there is no famine. Even if the price of energy goes up, and we have to learn to live in a different way, there is nothing compared to the struggles before. Well, that is again from a human perspective.
> Sorry for bothering you with my chatting, I really appreciate your generosity of standing here and allowing me to sit on your branch. I hope you will have a really great summer and many, many productive years to come. Maybe I will come back to you later this week, but for now, I say goodbye and thank you. Thank you and take care.

The brief remark about 'trivial knowledge for humans', which is even more so for pines, 'because it is knowledge of pines from a human perspective' is followed by a question that is the core problem in the whole experiment: 'How could I sensitise myself to be able to listen to you, to take in your perspective?' Is that even possible in any deeper sense?

The second conversation with the second pine tree, a small and sturdy one with several trunks growing on a hill next to the road, took place the following day and begins with lichen, while the most relevant topic is perhaps the question of the tree as a collectivity, approached first as a problem of address.

FIGURE 2.
Pondering with Örö Pines (2), video still.
Source: Author

14 May 2022

'Kära tall, martall' or Dear pine. Thank you for allowing me to sit on your trunk or one of your branches. I am not really sure if I should address you as you, one pine, or as you, many pines growing from the same root, but in English that does not make much difference, I guess. I thought I would ask you, or talk to you about lichen, because many of the pines on Örö Island do have beautiful lichen living on their trunks. Funny enough you don't have that many; there are some pale gray, greenish gray, but rather small ones compared to some of the others. Maybe they don't bother you, or maybe lichen don't bother pines in general. There is something fascinating about lichen as life forms because they are collaborative endeavours by algae and fungi, and very tough and hardy. Some can survive in very harsh circumstances. /--/
When I look at your trunk very closely, I can see something that could be lichen, but very small, so maybe there are different types of them. I remember I read somewhere that actually the part of you that is living tissue, is quite a thin layer under the bark on top of the wooden trunk. Most of your trunk is dead material or remains of former living cells. If this is true, that makes your relationship to your bark quite different. Maybe like human hair. If there would be an ant climbing on the skin on my head,

> I would surely sense it and not like it probably. But if there was an ant crawling in my hair, I would maybe not notice it immediately unless it was big enough to be felt by distance. Strange to look at such analogies with humans. I have to accept that I really cannot understand how it feels to have a bark like yours or to have several trunks like you have or to have lichen growing on your skin. Although human skin also has a lot of life forms, of bacteria or even fungi, living both inside and on the skin.
> Yes, probably the idea of addressing you as a group of trunks from the same root or as one tree with several branches, like a family, is a mistake. And I should try to see all of you more as a system, as systemic parts, engaging in collaborations of various kinds, and on different levels, beginning from the molecular level, and cellular and then different types of life forms and ... It is difficult, because we are so accustomed as humans to consider ourselves as persons and individuals and separate from our environment, that it is so easy to expand that sort of thinking to other creatures, like trees. If I were to think of you as a city instead, that might be more correct. But on the other hand, I have to stick to the species-specific behaviour that is given to me. That is the way that I am programmed to think and react and sense. Funny to think of being programmed, but of course we are also genetically programmed, you are and I am, although humans tend to pride themselves that they are adaptable and can learn new things and that is why they have survived and covered the earth. ..
> Sure, you pines are adaptable, too. When I look at the different pines on this small island, and how different the circumstances they are living in are, some on very dry soil and some in damp places, some solitary on a cliff and completely helpless against the wind and the storms and some in thickets of small pines growing next to each other and then tall, twisted, huge, weird, contorted pines. Well, sorry for saying that, but you are a small, weird and contorted pine; your trunk is divided in several and the part or the branch that I am sitting in is bent in a very strange way, but a way that is very comfortable for me to sit on. /--/

The remark 'strange to look at such analogies with humans' and the justification to 'stick to the species-specific behaviour that is given to me' introduces the problem of anthropocentrism and related questions like whether plants should be regarded as persons or not, which I have discussed elsewhere.[38] By talking to trees, by subjectifying them, I am

38 For a brief discussion, see Annette Arlander, *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees in Johannesburg and Environs* Arts Research Africa, The Wits

almost inevitably anthropomorphising them, because that is the form of subjectivity I have experience of, even if I don't imagine any tree spirit hiding behind the bark. By talking to the pine rather than writing to them, I nevertheless enable the pine to hear my voice, to register the sound, at least in principle.

The third conversation with the third pine, with a trunk lying on the ground covered in moss but still living, engages with classic problems like empathy, mind-body dualism and the question of whether we should respect trees as completely other or rather see them as relatives and look for commonalities among all lifeforms.

FIGURE 3.
Pondering with Örö Pines (3), video still.
Source: Author

School of Arts, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (2020): https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/items/5ee580a4-db3d-4de4-818e-7c6b65a16605, pp 8–12, based on Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Michael Marder, 'Is it ethical to eat plants?' *Parallax* **19** (1)(2013): 29–37; Matthew Hall, 'In defence of plant personhood', *Religions* **10** (5) (2019): 317; and Thomas J. Puleo, 'Incorporating nonhuman subjectivity into world society: The case of extending personhood to plants', in Dietrich Jung and Stephan Stetter (eds), *Modern Subjectivities in World Society: Global Structures and Local Practices*, pp. 211–27 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

15 May 2022

Hello pine, pleased to meet you. I have to admit that you look really extraordinary and you are also growing in an extraordinary beautiful place on a panorama spot; there is even a sign pointing to this hill saying that there is a beautiful view. Unfortunately, you are lying down on this hill, for the past several years, it seems, because your roots and your trunk have gathered moss for a while. But I can also see that your crown is alive and thriving. So despite toppling over, falling in a storm I guess, you continue living in this reclining pose, as if nothing happened. It is remarkable and amazing, and it is really difficult to imagine how that could be comparable with human existence. Maybe it could be like damaging your spine in such a way that you have to you use a wheelchair or lie down.

I know about the danger of trying to find similarities in order to feel empathy. I just read a text by Michael Marder,[39] recommended by a colleague, a text I read several years ago, which I had forgotten most of the points of, a really severe critique of empathy, even more a critique of pity. There is also a mention of the notion of compassion, of suffering with, that has been suggested by some philosophers like Schopenhauer influenced by Buddhism. I agree that when I try to somehow address you, and speak to you, I am actually talking to myself and I am somehow projecting something of myself into you. I recognise those limits, but I am not sure it is any better to think of you as somehow completely other. So I am not so sure that what he calls 'totaliarising' vitalism would be so dangerous. Anything that is 'totaliarising' sounds bad, which means that we would somehow not recognise the differences, but vitalism in the sense of recognising the common features of all life, despite the differences, I cannot really see the danger with. I think there might be more danger in thinking of vegetal life as something completely separate. And yes, Marder suggests that we should recognise the vegetal in ourselves, why not.[40]

But in some sense, the idea of assuming that there might be capacity to suffer and even a form of consciousness, or whatever can be produced in sophisticated forms of life in vegetation, like in old trees like you; I would prefer to err on the side of caution, so to speak. Although I cannot know how you feel, or what you think, I want to leave open the possibility

39 Michael Marder, 'The life of plants and the limits of empathy'. *Dialogue,* 51 (2012): 259–73. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217312000431

40 Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

that you feel, and that you think. And I am convinced that it is completely wrong to think of humans as utterly different from all other forms of life. That has been discussed a lot by contemporary post-humanist philosophers,[41] but the legacy of Western philosophy of emphasising the spiritual dimension in humans, spiritual in the sense of an inner soul that is distinguished from the outer body, this old mind-body dualism is strong. The idea of something inner as opposed to something outer, which is used to make a big difference between animals and plants or even more between humans and plants, there is something that is wrong with that.[42] I would like to think that we can be completely other, but we can also be the same. Because if I, out of respect, consider you as completely other, that otherness becomes an extra barrier. I think it is difficult enough to try to, if not communicate with you then to suffer with you, to enjoy with you, without such extra barriers.

I guess we could learn a lot from some indigenous cultures where there is assumed respect for other forms of life, even considered as persons or entities.[43] This fear of animism, or maybe in discussions of philosophy the fear of vitalism, is something I am not really convinced of. I am not a philosopher, so my lack of conviction is more emotional or intuitive. Why would vitalism be so dangerous? Why would the assumption that life has similarities be that? I think biologists assume that there is a common source for all life on Earth.[44] And even though life, different life forms are continually differentiating, it does not mean that they would somehow live in a completely different realm from humans. On the other hand, there is the idea of animism, the idea that there is an anima or animus or a soul, or life force, or even some sort of personhood in everything, not only in living things, but in rocks and rivers, and islands and so on. It might seem strange, but there is something in the human way

41 See, for example, Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Dona J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2016); David Wood, *Thinking Plant Animal Human: Encounters with Communities of Difference* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

42 For a discussion of the lack of interiority in plants, see Michael Marder, 'Of plants, and other secrets', *Societies 2013* **3** (1) (2012): 16–23.

43 For a popular introduction, see Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013)

44 LUCA, the Last Universal Common Ancestor of all life on earth, was mentioned by professor Howy Jacobs in 'Life – A Tree with Three Intertwined Branches', keynote at Aboagora – Between Arts and Sciences Symposium, Sibelius Museum, Turku 24 Aug. 2017.

of thinking that invites to that. I mean, we can get angry with our computers when they don't work, and think of them as somehow animated, so why not? Why not trees? Just because you are silent and slow to our eyes, why would you lack, well, soul. Soul is a difficult word, because soul brings immediately thoughts of the Christian conception of separation of the soul and the body.
Sorry for bothering you with these thoughts, which are probably utterly meaningless to you, or would be, if you could hear me or understand me. But, although I admit the limits of empathy, and dangers of narcissism and anthropocentrism that somehow inevitably are included in my attempts at addressing you, I still hope that you could sense my appreciation for your resilience and for your beauty, living in this marvellous spot and living in this spectacular way lying on the ground, which is not that usual for people of your kin. What else can I say? Except that I hope that my weight is not too much for you to carry, but I don't think so, because your trunk is really thick and you have been obviously lying here for quite a while. I wish you many years to come and thank you for your patience and apologise for my clumsiness, if I address you with the means that are available to me. So sorry for not being able to empathise with you or to suffer with you in an appropriate manner from your perspective. Take care.

This type of compassion for other living beings, like feeling with a pine tree lying on the ground, might seem like reckless sentimentality, but it could also be a first step to recognising our commonality and co-dependence with all life on this planet and acknowledging the necessary sensitivity and thereby also capacity to suffer that is shared by all living beings.

The fourth conversation with the fourth tree, an old pine growing along a rocky hillside, focuses on the idea of plants performing their place, showing in their form the characteristics of the site they live in, demonstrating in their body the circumstances they have experienced and grown through.

FIGURE 4.
Pondering with Örö Pines (4), video still.
Source: Author.

16 May 2022

Hello pine. Great to be here with you on the eastern shore of Örö. The wind is from the west, but it is so strong that it reaches us here, too. You are climbing up on the rock in an extraordinary way and from your trunk I can see that you are a venerable old pine. Of course, saying that you are venerable means using human terminology, which is probably not the right way to do it. I am impressed by your performance; maybe we could call it performance in the sense of accomplishment, like a sports performance, the performance of following the slope with your branches and your trunk. From here, I can see that you have quite a large crown, which continues on the hill, although sticking low to the ground all the way. You make me think of the way that all plants, also trees, and especially the pines here, are expressing the quality of the place where they grow.[45] In displaying the circumstances that you have grown in, not only are you a display of your own history, but you are also a display of this place, and the affordances that this place provides. All the pines here are performing in that sense and in very different ways. They are

45 Craig Holdrege, *Thinking like a Plant: A Living Science for Life* (Lindisfarne: Steinerbooks Inc., 2013), p. 9.

located in slightly different spots and have started to grow, have begun their life, in slightly different moments. Or very different moments.
The idea of plants performing is something that I am supposed to be speaking of tomorrow and I have written about it in several contexts.[46] Many people agree that plants do perform in different senses of the word,[47] and also perform in the sense of presenting themselves or their flowers or fruits for animals, insects mostly, that eat them. Pines are wind pollinated, so your flowers are not spectacular in any way. Your cones are pretty, but they are not there to seduce humans, because they move in other ways. The shape of your body is one part of your performance. There are people who think of the way you grow, by repeating certain features, as a form of restored behaviour that is sometimes used to characterise performance.[48] And some people, like philosopher Luce Irigaray, explain that your body is actually your language, it is saying by doing,[49] performative in a very literal sense. There are people who criticise these ideas of either a semiotic understanding of communicating through performance, or the linguistic understanding of saying by doing, by expressing.[50] I like to think that, besides these sports-like accomplishments that you really do all the time – calling them sports-like is of course stupid, because it is a question of survival for you – I also like this idea that you appear, you appear in the world, for other creatures in the world, and for the world. As Karen Barad might say, you participate

46 See, for example, Arlander, 'Performing with trees', pp. 158–76; Annette Arlander, 'Performing with plants in the ob-scene Anthropocene', *Nordic Theatre Studies* **32** (2020): 121–42: https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/issue/view/8763; Annette Arlander, *Performing and Thinking with Trees*, Art theoretical writings from the Academy of Fine Art 15, University of the Arts Helsinki: https://taju.uniarts.fi/handle/10024/7666

47 Prudence Gibson and Catriona Sandilands, 'Introduction: Plant performance', *Performance Philosophy Journal* **6** (2) (2021): 1–23. https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/372

48 Travis Brisini, 'Phytomorphizing performance: Plant performance in an expanded field', *Text and Performance Quarterly* **39** (1) (2019): 3–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2018.1559350

49 Luce Irigaray, 'What the vegetal world says to us', in Monica Gagliano, John. C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira (eds), *The Language of Plants - Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017) pp. 126–35.

50 Mirko Nikolić and Neda Radulovic, 'Aesthetics of inhuman touch: Notes for "vegetalised" performance', *Ruukku - Studies in Artistic Research* 9 (2018): https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/372629/372630

in the performance of the world.[51] Here, when we are performing for the video camera, we could also say that we are not intentionally performing in the sense of putting on a display for the camera. I do that, while you don't necessarily do that, but you are appearing in this place, in this very moment. And I am trying to appear with you.

This idea of place is the crucial thing. One way I try to respect your specific way of being is to come and perform with you where you are, in your home, in your place, the place that you are expressing by your being, rather than bringing parts of you into human settings, like a stage, or a gallery or a museum. Of course, that can be done. If we think of potted plants, or a bonsai, that would not be difficult. But to move you away from here would be really dangerous and difficult and might damage you severely or even kill you, and would be disrespectful. It is difficult to imagine such a tight connection between location and existence, because humans and animals are able to move, so, even though we can have very strong emotional relationships to places or be formed by the places and cultures where we are born, we can still move. Being able to transform yourself depending on where you are to such an extent as you do, that is somehow amazing. Of course, you cannot change yourself back, so to speak. Even if the circumstances now were to change a lot, like they might do with climate change, if it would become much warmer, or new types of insects, or even harder storms, or whatever, you still carry the legacy of your life history with you. You cannot get rid of this bent trunk of yours. Or maybe your branches extend further and maybe they could develop some sort of roots on the ground further up on the hill, moving upwards. At least they can use the hill and the rock and the soil on the rock to attach to, as support. /--/

Anyway, thank you for letting me sit here and my sincerest appreciation and admiration for your beautiful form, which I think is a result of your extraordinary performance. Thank you for that and all the best for the future.

The inseparability of plant and place is emphasised by philosophers like Michael Marder.[52] Emmanuele Coccia goes even further by stressing

51 'Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility', Karen Barad 'Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* **28** (3) (2003): 801–31, at 821.

52 Michael Marder, 'The place of plants: Spatiality, movement, growth', *Performance Philosophy* **1** (2015): 185–94. https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/28

that plants not only adapt to their site, but also create or produce their environment as all living beings do.[53] Thus plants, or pine trees here, are not only experts in site-specificity, but the core creators of this world.

FIGURE 5.
Pondering with Örö Pines (5), video still.
Source: Author.

The fifth conversation with the fifth pine (recorded 17 May 2022) is reflecting on the common reluctance among humans to understand plants as sentient and the problem of vegetal consciousness. It is here omitted in the interest of space. The problem of plant intelligence and possible consciousness is a controversial topic discussed by botanists and cognitive scientists,[54] and deliberately avoided by some scientists, as described in a fascinating popular account summarising some recent views.[55]

53 Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

54 See, for example, Paco Calvo and Natalie Lawrence, *Planta Sapiens. The New Science of Plant Intelligence* (New York: W.W. Norton & company, 2023).

55 Zoë Schlanger, *The Light Eaters. How the Unseen World of Plant Intelligence Offers a New Account of Life on Earth* (New York: Harper, 2024)

FIGURE 6.
Pondering with Örö Pines (6), video still.
Source: Author.

The sixth and last conversation (recorded 18 May 2022) with the sixth pine tree, an old acquaintance growing in a truly sculptural form on the western shore, circles around returning, resting and the narrow limits of the conditions needed for life. It is not included here, but available with the other ones as a transcript online.[56]

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The practice demonstrated by the above encounters with pines began as still-acts for a video camera together with trees, developed into writing letters to trees by the trees and then into talking with trees directly, recording an impromptu speech synchronised with the video image, as in these examples. This way of working emphasises spontaneity and retains something of the 'real-time' and 'real effort' flavour of performance art, but does it have anything to do with conversations with the trees? In terms of reciprocity expected in human conversations, not very much.

56 See Pondering with Örö Pines https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1634001

The pine trees do not have a chance to intervene directly. Their indirect influence, however, is probably even greater than expected, whether we look at it in terms of inscription[57] or trans-corporeal exchanges[58] or 'discursive practices', which, according to Karen Barad, are 'not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted'.[59] Although the practice of talking to trees can rightly be criticised as anthropomorphising and even anthropocentric, Rosi Braidotti's distinction between these two terms might offer some support. For her, human life 'will always be anthropomorphic, that is to say, embedded and embodied, enfleshed, affective, relational', and only 'by embracing resiliently our anthropomorphic frame' can we avoid anthropocentrism and 'become creatively *zoe*-centered', centred on life.[60]

If we think about this way of working as an undisciplinary method, to be developed for various purposes, what could be learned from this experiment? A challenging task with a strict time limit, such as choosing a tree, recording a conversation and transcribing it, editing and publishing a video work and a podcast episode, all in one day, can be useful by forcing one to act decisively and to trust one's initial ideas. The short time frame helps to keep things simple, to avoid ambitious aesthetic goals and to ignore debilitating self-criticism. Moreover, the act of performing for camera and recording one's talk energises the moment, improves concentration and awareness of the tree, and facilitates the generation of ideas. If the main purpose is to generate thoughts, recording the talk is probably sufficient and the video is superfluous, although it does foreground the tree more than sound. The challenge of repeating the task for six consecutive days, however, is perhaps less useful. While it prevents too much preparing, the tight schedule does not allow time for deeper understanding to emerge, and forces one to work with previously assembled resources. The need for immediate

57 Patricia Vieira, '*Phytographia*: Literature as Plant Writing', in Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan and Patricia Vieira (eds), *The Language of Plants – Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 217–33.

58 Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures. Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).

59 Barad, 'Posthumanist performativity', p. 828.

60 Braidotti, 'Four theses on posthuman feminism', p. 35.

'results' can be counterproductive; the material produced is inevitably inconsistent. From the perspective of durational performance, however, the challenge was perhaps too easy. Perhaps reaching a point beyond exhaustion is needed to sensitise one to the trees. Or then not. A softer, slower, more careful, and more caring way of working might be needed for a subtler contact with the trees. Based on this experiment, I would say three days and three tree collaborators could be enough, especially for scholarly or educational purposes. The only way to know is to try.

Besides being a method worth exploring when enlisting the help of pine trees in trying to think anew and shift one's perspective to consider other life forms as sentient beings, talking to trees is a great way to get in touch with the world, regardless of recording tools. Rather than giving 'voice' to the trees, as texts might do, video works can give them some visibility. Whether there might be better ways than talking with the pines, however, is a topic for further research.

Annette Arlander, DA, is an artist, researcher and a pedagogue, former professor in performance art and theory and professor in artistic research at University of the Arts Helsinki, as well as at Stockholm University of the Arts. Her research interests include artistic research, performance-as-research, and the environment. Her artwork moves between the traditions of performance art, media art and environmental art. She is the author of *Performing and Thinking with Trees* (https://taju.uniarts.fi/handle/10024/7666)

See https://annettearlander.com

Email: annette.arlander@uniarts.fi