

*Aesthetics of inhuman touch: notes for 'vegetalised' performance*¹

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Published in *Ruuku*, no. 9, 2018, Special Issue "Practicing New Materialisms in the Arts",
edited by Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Milla Tiainen, Tero Nauha & Marie-Luise Angere

Permalink: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/372629/372630>



1. mirko nikolić, *earth minor*, at *burning hearts of a thousand tiny matters*, P3 Ambika, London // 1 - 5 February 2017 // Photo: Marika Troili

¹ 'Vegetalisation' or 'plantification' is a practice proposed by Natasha Myers (2014) in form of a multispecies yoga exercise for 'cultivating your inner plant.' In "Conversations on Plant Sensing: Notes From the Field," Myers furthers that plant scientists' sensoria "get 'vegetalized' over the long duration of their experimental inquiry" (2015: 42), and also, which is in line with the line of our article, that concepts can be 'vegetalised.' (ibid.: 62)

1. Beyond human performances: “touching the inhuman”

Even though there are a growing number of performances with other-than-human subjects (both organic and inorganic), as well as groundbreaking research in the fields of Critical Animal Studies, Posthuman/ism and, more recently, Critical Plant studies, which give evidence to more than human agencies- performance studies still centre the idea of performance on human animals. Human exclusivity in performance studies is completely normalised, and the abuse of non-humans for the sake of art is rarely questioned. Mirroring the exclusion of non-humans in philosophy and/or ethics, the general public and political economy and law, artists often get praised for entertaining the audience for rather simplistically displaying animals alive, dead or dying (some famous examples would include Damian Hirst’s installations featuring dead livestock, sharks, and killing butterflies or Maurizio Cattelan’s sculptures featuring live and dead animals²). The fact that too many living beings serve as food and commodities makes it even harder to account for these artists and problematise their abuse. The paradox is even more evident with the death of the non-human body that is so normalised that it gets equated with *beautiful* or *appealing* - as for example flower plants traditionally serve in all, and predominantly aesthetic areas of human culture. On the one hand “a paragon of natural beauty and an expression of harmony, symmetry, colour, and other aesthetic qualities *in itself*” (John, 2015: 40), which actually transforms it into the perfect “object of sight” and “object of art” (John, 2011). Consequently, the destruction of the plants for ‘the sake of art’ might go unnoticed even if it is staged³.

Aesthetics as a modern discipline developed by way of objectification of plants and animals, for example through the notion of landscape as well as still life. In this, we have to say that mainstream aesthetics has participated in ‘objectification’, ‘consummation’ and

² It is also curious to note that in these cases the works are classified as installations or sculptures, thus entirely objectifying animal bodies.

³ See for example performance by Jan Fabre, *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*- where performers simulate sex with potted plants, a process which theatrically devastates the plants, and *bloody* animal flesh drops from performers pants, both used as a shock tactic

'fragmentation' of other-than-human bodies, discursive procedures that Carol Adams (1990) individuated in the context of women and animal (and we would add, plant) othering.

One of the main strategies for cultural normalisation of non-human death, as many authors have argued, is for example the tactic of spatial/material and discursive disassociation/disconnection of the corpses from the once living being (e.g. see Adams 1990). For example, the slaughter is often invisible, and spatially distant from the consumers, whilst linguistically there is differentiation between the animal as the living being and animal as dietary commodity/food. As Kathrene Gillespie argues:

The animals lose their animal names and are, instead, identified as the meat product that will be produced by their slaughter. This method of labelling the animal as a consumable product is a step in disconnecting the consumer from the animal itself and represents the commodification of the animal while still alive. (Gillespie 2011: 112)

If the death of non-humans figures predominantly as edible, aesthetic, or a wearable commodity in most peoples lives and culture worldwide, how do we even start to think about the idea of performance practice that liberates them from this position?

Here we can observe the paradox that even when an animal appears on stage, its other-than-human body is in an extremely precarious if not dangerous position. With the performance art having background in rituals, the animals in performances were most commonly sacrificed in some form of pseudo-ritual or nostalgic re-imagining of the ritual. Animal in this type of performances is not a performer, or even a subject of performance, but an object. Here we might think of an endless proliferation of Hermann Nitsch's performances involving slaughtered animals, or the pseudo-shamanistic approach of Joseph Beuys. Often, performers use the legal possibilities of killing an animal to induce emotional response from the audience- for example Croatian performance artist Vlasta

Delimar killed a hen as a way of reminiscing about her late aunt *Marička*, or ex-Yugoslav artist, Raša Todosijević in his performance *Decision as Art*, when he tortured a fish by drinking and puking the water from the fish tank until the fish completely suffocated. In these cases, we see that cultural inclusion can reiterate real life oppression and exploitation, even when the artists themselves want to criticise or highlight the issue. The question of other-than humans in performances, as this article will show stretches far beyond the question of ethics. It is the question that challenges the very foundations of performance studies - namely the notion that the performative is defined by its speech privilege, furthermore that the condition of possibility for performative action is the very ability to speak (see Austin 1963). The argument that we want to pursue is that the very notion of performance needs a more-than-human/posthuman perspective, in order for the material performances to start to acknowledge all the becomings and relations that emerge and constitute the event of 'worlding' (Haraway, 2008) - of making the world. In this article we will focus on plants, both in terms of theorising 'vegetal performativity,' as well as providing an analysis of significant performance practices with plants. We will discuss the 'place of plants' in performance (Marder, 2015), tackling the issue of the lack of recognition of their agency, exploitation and/or abuse of plants in (for) arts. More importantly, we will discuss *what, and even, if, there is a place for humans in the capacious world of vegetal performativity by starting from their mode of being/becoming*. By understanding non-human performativity completely outside of artistic performances might help us get closer to the posthuman performativity from the perspective of ethics of care. Only from that standpoint we can start thinking about the possibilities of performing together with plants and for plants. The question that this article pursues is how we can theorise the performance and not centre the human as the only producer and/or creator of the event, specifically in the context of performances involving plants. In this, we are drawing from the current work at the intersection of critical animal and plant studies with posthuman/ism to challenge the very notion of performance as understood in humanist cultural studies.

Taking for example the often used and seemingly broad definition by Erika Fischer-Lichte:

Performance is a participatory event, that is “created out of the interactions of participants. By this definition the term performance can refer to a wide variety of events: a traditional theatre performance in a proscenium theatre in which the actors and the audience are strictly separated; a “Happening” in which these roles are not so clearly demarcated; a soccer game with spectators as well as Church mass; a wedding as well as a political convention; a funeral as well as a World’s Fair.” (Fischer-Lichte, 2014: 18)

Most definitions of performance agree that it is a singular/unique event that emerges when bodies meet and interact with each other, both temporally and materially connected within the same time/space coordinates. Audience and performers meet and react to each other. In other words, all the participants of the performance react to their environment. What happens during the performance is not the chain of actions and reactions, but multiplying reactions of both audience and performers, everybody equally reacting to everyone. The reactions can be diverse, both somatic and cognitive, external (think of someone sneezing during the performance, or forgetting to turn off the phone) or internal (we might think of something that happened before, or quietly suffer the consequences of what we ate for example), and if someone would bark or sing it would constitute and shape it accordingly. These differentially un/predictable reactions to importantly different environments and circumstances constitute what is called a performance. All the participants create the performance together, performers and audience together co-author the event. (See Fischer-Lichte, 2014)

Even though apparently inclusive and democratic definitions might allow multispecies agencies involved in the process of co-creation, the epistemic privilege is undoubtedly granted exclusively to the humans, as well as the becoming, the liveliness of the artistic production: “The human body is a unique aesthetic material; it is a living organism, always in a state of becoming; that is a continual process of transformation. With every breath and

every movement, the body creates itself anew. Bodily being-in-the-world, not *being* but *becoming* contradicts the concept of the artwork as a product. A human body can only become an artwork as a corpse.” (Fisher-Lichte, 2014: 25) Performance, therefore, pits itself against reification of the body, but whose bodies count as bodies?



2. mirko nikolić, *im/ponderabilia*, exhibited at *Good Vibrations*, curated by Elina Suoyrjö at SIC Space, Helsinki // 29 April - 28 May 2017

What about non-humans? Obviously, if it wasn't specified, this could apply to the non-human bodies as well. But the fact that it is specified makes it very explicit in equating the notion of the body, the liveliness, the artistic creation and the transformation as exclusively human characteristic. This compliments to the fact that linguistically speaking, if a plant co-authors the performance, does it get the credit? If we define performance as bodies being present at the same time, we have to ask inevitably- whose presence counts as such? How do we define the body in the performance? Who are the implied subjects-objects of performance?

Far from thinking of itself as exclusivist, performance studies in general tend to frame the event of performance as a non-hierarchical co-becoming, and to elaborate the generation of aesthetics by employing a concept of liminality (see Schechner, 1977; Fischer-Lichte, 2014). The term generated from the Latin word *limen*, which means threshold and refers to a ritual subject that is not here nor there, that is *betwixt and between*. Importantly, throughout the liminal phase ritual subject is symbolically in the state of *transition* and during that time their identity is in the process of becoming, which is a consequence of destabilized cultural and social categories. This concept was very useful for understanding the performance mainly because it clearly conveys the *transformative potential* of the performance (the identity changes after the completion of the liminal phase), but also accentuates the important aspect that is the affect of stripping of secular identities and immersing oneself into dehierarchised community of equals or *communitas* (see Turner, 1969). That way the concept of liminality aims to convey the inclusivity and at the same time to depart from identifying performance as an exclusively social phenomenon and thus to determine its supposedly aesthetical character. But in effect it achieves the opposite- it is centered around the feeling of belonging/escaping a specific, fixed and rounded social identity thus perpetuating a nature/culture divide and eventually erasing the inhuman relationalities and becomings both as material creators and producers of meanings. Eventually performance studies reveal itself as immersed in the hierarchy of existing social, cultural and political structures, thus completely incapable of granting identity and recognition to the agencies that are not yet recognized by the law, and/or other socio-cultural institutions.

In order to account for material agency and participation provided by non-humans in the performance practice, it is necessary to problematise the humanist notion of performance from several perspectives. Firstly, to account for materiality of the more-than-human agencies as constitutive of the event. This will inherently bring multispecies perspective to the understanding of the performance. Along these lines, it would be important to account

non-human bodies as bodies. In order to do that we will turn to posthuman performativity, which will allow us to take a look at the notion of performativity as more-than human. We find posthumanist performativity to be an apt framework from which to rework the understandings of the body and performativity in performance art, especially in the way it is developed in the work of science studies scholars Andrew Pickering (1995) and Karen Barad (2003, 2007). This notion of performativity is radically departing from concepts developed by Austin (1963), which was concerned with exploring the language as action bearer (e.g. *How to do things with words*)⁴. Posthumanist performativity considers the notion of performativity as a complex 'entanglement' of discourse and matter, where discourse (which can be linguistic and not) is only one part of the mangle. Importantly, posthumanist theories of performativity are what we call 'flattened ontologies,' therefore they see neither matter nor discourse as foundational in metaphysical terms. Instead, the performativity of matter subverts the inherent hierarchisation which renders it passive, less valuable or the other of the logos, rendering materiality as dynamic and agential.

Barad's project of intra-action is based on the idea of differential positionality *within* 'material-discursive entanglements' with the world, and hinges on the recognition, derived from Niels Bohr's quantum theory, that "we are a part of that nature we seek to understand" (2007: 67). It is closely related to and in line with Donna Haraway's theorisation of 'situated knowledges' (1988). The two authors have opened numerous ethico-political questions about what interspecies practices of knowing and being entail, and how to make ourselves more 'response-able' to the world. In performance art, this can be understood as attempting to incite liminal transitions beyond nature-culture divide, acknowledging participation from human and more-than-human agencies.

⁴ It is important to note that posthuman performativity also differs from the more materially oriented notion of gender performativity, developed by Judith Butler (1990) in a sense that extends beyond the identity politics and/or as cultural construction and taps into the realm of the performativity/activity/agentiality of the matter itself.

For these reasons, we will try to shift our focus to the ability to affect and to move/change/transform as the condition of possibility of the performance. By shifting the centre from the ideas of presence (privileging *logos*) and body (privileging human body), we will turn to the notions of touch (both materially and semiotically) and affect (accounting both human and more-than-human bodily abilities to change and ignite change), following the concept of posthumanist, and, in our case, vegetal performativity (Barad, 2003). Plants, we will claim, perform in various ways. An easy way to figure this is to take a stroll in a meadow, and to get immersed into fields of affect. “[W]alk among [the flowers], and you see faces turned toward you (though not only you), beckoning, greeting, informing promising - *meaning*” (Pollan, 2001: 179). If we leave aside Pollan’s anthropomorphised language, here we glimpse vegetals’ capability for interspecies and even interkingdom ‘mattering’ (Barad, 2007).

Performative practices have over the recent years opened up towards vegetal agency in new ways, and this is the territory that this article inhabits. A number of performance artists takes plants to be co-performers, participating subjects rather than objects, sentient and even intelligent beings to collaborate with. There are numerous ways in which humans can approach plants as co-performers, or, to join vegetal performances. The variety of vegetal skills affords them. ‘Vegetalisation’ (Myers, 2014) of art is underway, and we are writing from within this blooming field.

Taking plants as radical difference in Deleuzian sense, we will turn to plant performances to account for all possible alterities and understand performance as an event of inclusivity and co-creation. Following critical plant studies, we thus begin, by asserting that plants sense and act in distinct ways, and, drawing on posthuman/ism, we take that *worlding* is fundamentally a performativity; thus we understand that plants are performative beings, engaging in ‘differential intra-activity’ (Barad, 2007). From this standpoint, we will think: what does understandings of vegetal performativity bring to specifically artistic

performances that involve plants? To begin to understand this, we will diffract notions of affect theory and agential realist performative onto-epistemology of intra-action to explore them in the context of vegetal performativity. A potential middle ground of meeting for affect and intra-action is the rich world of vegetal performativity.

2. Vegetal performativity: affective intra-activity

Vegetal performativity provides a standpoint from which one could advance a re(con)figuration of posthuman/ist theories of performativity and, importantly, glimpse how human-vegetal artistic performances might unfurl. To pursue this, we propose a diffractive reading of conceptual frameworks of affect and intra-action in relation to vegetal mode of being, or, as a follow-up on Marder's 'plant-thinking' (2013): a vegetal performativity. Posthuman/ist theories of performativity are a starting point, though perhaps not the endpoint, in drawing up a specifically vegetal performativity. Plants not only in important ways participate in the posthuman/ist art-philosophy space of shared theoretical and practical experimentation, but, as we shall try to show, are a distinct discourse that positively challenges the present theorisations of affect and intra-action⁵.

Entanglement of humans and plants is an evolutionary phenomenon, but it is not fixed in time, it is an ongoing performativity, as we wouldn't be able to live more than a few seconds without oxygen plants separate from the atmosphere, or more than a few days without eating them. However, culturally speaking, the place of plants is quite less primary, as it has been compellingly demonstrated in the recent critical plant studies. In Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as in Western philosophy since at least the Greeks, plants had been relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy of living beings (see, Hall, 2011; Marder, 2013; Nealon, 2016). To counter these narratives of exclusion or backgrounding, the above cited authors, together with others, have reasserted the inextricableness of vegetal materiality and discursivity with those of humans. These philosophical or cultural studies investigations have ran hand in hand, and in conversation, with recent advances in plant science and their popularisation. Groundbreaking findings have centred on vegetal

⁵ Working out through details of these different approaches is subject to an emerging field of scholarship (Shabbar, 2016; Thiele, 2016a, 2016b; Ringrose & Renold, 2016; nikolić, 2017; Slaby et al., 2017).

capabilities of perception, communication, learning⁶. These various strands converge into the claims about 'plant cognition' and, ultimately, 'plant intelligence' (for a review of the literature, Gagliano, 2014). At first these topics might indicate certain anthropomorphic biases (e.g., fascination with information and intelligent behaviour), but plant sciences have brought about important decentrings of the human. One of the leading scientists in the field, Anthony Trewavas, proposes: "It is not too much to say that a plant is capable of cognition in much the same way that a human being is. The plant gathers information about its surroundings, combines this with internal information about its internal state and makes decisions that reconcile its well-being with its environment" (2009: 609-610). It should be borne in mind that, according to various estimate, plants amount to around 99.7 percent of the biomass, "Earth is an ecosystem inarguably dominated by plants." (Mancuso & Viola, 2015: 100) Regarding plants as highly advanced and intelligent creatures poses numerous ethical and political challenges to, for example, political economies of agriculture and forestry (Myers, 2017), and, in the last instance, the morality of eating plants (Marder, 2013b). For what interests us, arts and humanities have a task ahead of rendering justice to these complex beings, imagining and fostering more just and responsible entanglements than what modernity or the agriculture-driven Neolithic had done.

⁶ For approachable introductions into the literature: see, Chamovitz, 2012; Karban, 2015; Mancuso & Viola, 2015. For up-to-date advances, the journal *Plant Signalling & Behaviour* is indispensable resource.



3. mirko nikolić, *im/ponderabilia*, exhibited at *Good Vibrations*, curated by Elina Suoyrjö at SIC Space, Helsinki // 29 April - 28 May 2017

In posthuman/ist terms, plants are deeply involved in lively intra-actions, with and without humans. Barad's statement is at its most vivid if we think of vegetal-animal interactions: "‘Things’ don't preexist; they are agentially enacted and become determinately bounded and propertied within phenomena." (2007: 150) This passage, one of the founding moves of agential realism is often attributed to the quantum level of reality, thus slightly outside social studies' concerns. To stress the obvious (yet backgrounded), *we are incessantly inside phenomena that involve vegetal agencies*. "[R]elata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions" (ibid.: 140); humans and other animals 'emerge' through evolutionary, biochemical and physiological intra-actions with the vegetal world.

Taking on board joint efforts of critical plant studies, plant intelligence and biosemiotics, for our purposes we take that *plants are bodies capable of agency (intra-action) and affection*. Plants affect other beings via various means, for example, by producing scents, or by

making flowers. These affections contain strong aesthetic components, directed at individual animals or captivating entire cultures (Pollan, 2001). Vegetals produce fields of affect that are actualised through inter-kingdom cross-species molecular intra-actions. In their re-reading of bee orchid and bees intra-actions, 'athwart' dominant biological explanations, Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers ask: "What if the topology of insect/orchid encounters were conditioned not just by a calculating economy that aims to maximize fitness but also by an *affective ecology* shaped by pleasure, play, and experimental propositions?" (2012: 78) Hustak and Myers thus look at how anatomical articulations among species "[indicate] practices of joining together and building alliances, affinities, and connections" (ibid.: 105). This goes in line with Elizabeth Grosz's feminist reading of Darwin, whereby she sees art operating on evolutionary timescales: "[a]rt and nature, art in nature, share a common structure: that of excessive and useless production—production for its own sake, production for the sake of profusion and differentiation." (Grosz, 2008: 9) The ground for this radically expanded notion of artistry is Deleuze and Guattari's claim that art "begins with the animal." (1994: 183) In their description, art deals with percepts and affects, "artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affect." (ibid.: 175) Taking it even further, a little below, Deleuze and Guattari expand: "Redon entitled a lithograph 'There was perhaps a first vision attempted in the flower.' The flower sees-pure and simple terror: 'And do you see that sunflower looking in through the bedroom window? It stares into my room all day.' (Lowry, 1963)" (1994: 175-6) Plants are participants in creation and transmission affect, but in ways somewhat different than what Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari envisaged.

Spinoza, the philosopher of affect, considered that at least animals were capable of affect, specifically of 'appetite' or 'desire':

the emotions of the animals which are called irrational... only differ from man's emotions, to the extent that brute nature differs from human nature. Horse and men are alike carried away by the desire of procreation; but the desire of the former is

equine, the desire of the latter is human. So also the lusts and appetites of insects, fishes, and birds must needs vary according to the several natures. (*Ethics*, III.LVII.N.)

Extending Spinoza into for him unforeseen vegetal trajectory, and in line with Hustak and Myers, we can advance that plants and insects in the above entanglements are affected by desire, they are desiring-bodies, or, to say it in the plane of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, 'desiring-machines.' But, and here is the thing, vegetal desires go far beyond procreation, plants are of profoundly queer nature as the earliest botanists realised, with intense desires for transitioning and becoming-other (Sandilands, 2017). Furthermore, contra any organismic paradigm that sees body or even species as delimited, plants are decentralised, rhizomes, networks or 'swarm intelligences.' (Mancuso & Viola, 2014: 132) This is where we re/turn to intra-action.

Plants rehearse boundary redrawing intensely and extensively, they experiment all day long with forces and elements in their proximity. This experimentation stems from an intense attention towards the outside, "competing signals vie for the plant's attention, localized and dispersed throughout all its organs without exception" (Marder, 2012: 4). In other words, plants are interested in becoming-affected all-over and intense ways. It can be said that plants practice liminality in their encounters with the world. This liminal affectivity means, in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, living through encounters with other bodies **means** a "melodic line of continuous variation" (1978). In diffraction with Barad, through intra-action "marks are left on bodies': bodies differentially materialise as particular patterns of the world as a result of the specific cuts and reconfiguring that are enacted." (ibid.: 176) Almost in unison, Deleuze explains affections—the first type of knowledge—as "the trace of another body on my body;" (1978), *being affected*, being object inside of an intra-action. What matters is what kind of traces are being made and left, are they joyful or sad? and, for whom? We should stop thinking of the form of plants as contained contours or surfaces. Vegetal bodies are zones of intense exchange of molecules, veritable fields of

affectivity where topologies of the world are being re(con)figured. Perhaps closest to vegetal mode of being, Deleuze, in his lecture on Spinoza, describes affection as “mixture” (mélange).

This performativity of mixing (with) the world is grounded in radical openness, “the ethical injunction for openness to the other. The plant’s future is entirely contingent on alterity when it comes to the process of ripening, the possibilities of flourishing and withering away, and so forth” (Marder, 2013: 107). This is not a form of passivity, it is an agential ‘response-ability’ (Schrader, 2010): experimentation with capacities to be affected, entangled with a quest for finding ways to respond. Plants are as powerful, or, let us say, joyful, as an assemblage they root in and branch in to, as their collectivity of fuzzy boundaries and partial affiliations. In posthuman/ist terms, plants are beings of intra-activity, their bodies tell stories of agentiality of the world, of encounters of differences, of queer ‘mixtures’ (Deleuze, 1978) of agencies. More than ‘congealing of agency’ (Barad, 2007: 151), less than strata.



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Vegetal performativity is to some degree common to all living beings. Back at the origins of (non)vegetal thinking, the first type of soul in Aristotle's *De Anima* is vegetal or 'nutritive soul,' "capacity for growth but also for decay and the assimilation of nutrients" (Marder, 2013: 37). One point of view on nutritive soul is that it manifests as desire, or, in Nietzsche, "the will to accumulate force" (in Marder, 2013: 40). However, and here we follow Marder, this characterisation is incompatible with the non-identity and divisibility of plants. Contra this idea of increase or accumulation of power, Marder describes vegetal soul as "dispersed," infinitely divisible, other to itself and hospitable to others. Vegetal soul is "that which is most widely shared," (2013: 46) but also "subject to a desire for unlimited appropriation" (ibid.). The challenge that vegetal performativity poses becomes vivid here. Plants are practitioners of 'radical immanence,' they engage in 'shared conversations' with both biotic and abiotic modes of being making no distinction whatsoever between their 'territory' and 'earth.' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994) Vegetality is an intra-active entanglement

of dividuation, openness, response-ability, hospitality and dispersivity. They never grow alone, it is an atmosphere in becoming. These are the traits of vegetal performativity that any human performance involving them needs to be responsive and accountable for. To perform vegetally is to 'face the inhuman,' (Barad, 2015) becoming response-able to the vegetal agency within and without: breathing, growing together, letting pass through, extending hospitality to difference, not turning one's back.

Perhaps a more adequate understanding of performance that speaks to vegetality, rather than that of the singular event, might be the avant-garde model of 'performance of everyday life,' a radical blurring and overflowing of performance between 'life' and 'art,' as developed by practitioners in the 1970's and 80's (Linda Montano, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, On Kawara, Tehching Hsieh, and others). Especially relevant are Laderman Ukeles's performances centred on reproductive labour and 'maintenance art,' almost imperceptible acts of taking care of how world comes to matter. Prefiguring Guattari's 'three ecologies' by decades, Laderman Ukeles in 1967 proposed *Maintenance Art Exhibition: "Care,"* consisting of three parts: "Personal, General, and Earth Maintenance." Performing across three registers is very much in plant spirit.

One specific mode of affective intra-action embodies this immanent openness and response-ability: touch. Vegetal bodies deprivilege visibility, and in principle contradict the idea of (any) body being hierarchically above the other. The principle of radical openness is particularly strong in touching intra-actions. Here we can note two tendencies connected with two elemental realms in-between which plants dwell: root tips touch their way around, and are also touched by mycorrhiza fungi; aerial parts of plants are open if not expectant of touch by elements and living bodies, with intense zones of touching in zones of reproductive apparatus. In all directions, through touch we can see how plants embody Deleuze's ethical question how "to believe in this world". With Kathrin Thiele, this is

a thought of pure immanence, [that] does not mean producing an affirmation of the world according to the ideality of 'what should be' –measuring the possible via the criterion of 'what is', and thus limiting this world from the very start. No, what is truly required is to produce an active affirmation in the face of every single result the world ever takes. (2010: 35)

Plants enact this 'active affirmation' with their whole bodies, as they shape themselves to intra-actions and involvements with other bodies. Radically open and vulnerable to the outside, to the elements and animal bodies, they 'believe' in possible alliances, but also withdraw without negating an otherness.

How to be worthy of this ethico-politics of openness and response-ability? With Thiele again, "Deleuze and Foucault turn the thought of the outside from harbouring a promise of the advent of a better world – separated from the here and now – into the very adventurous process of the here and now itself, utterly immanent and this-worldly." (Thiele, 2010: 36) Through their adventurous exploration of their environment, plants embody and enact that 'radical immanence' Deleuze and Guattari were looking for, being 'worthy' of intra-active affects that keep the world from collapsing into an immunitarian/paranoid grid of suffocating enclosures. Touching intra-action is ultimately about opening to and encountering more of the world (e.g., by expanding leaf surface to face it, or diving deeper with a root), intensifying fragility and indeterminacy. Crucially, this intensification is always collective, an intra-activity with other elements, inorganic and organic. Leaf is a mark intra-acted among many bodies, a joyful atmospheric performance. Performing vegetally is to affirmatively open up towards a possibility of intra-acting 'thousand tiny sexes' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 213), a 'thousand tiny races' (Saldanha, 2006), 'a thousand tiny intersections' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011)...

3. Vegetal touch: arts of 'vegetalisation'

Touch is the most intense site of vegetal negotiation with another, it is a particularly sensitive domain and a crucial site for figuring and cultivating an aesthetics of bio- or phytophilia.

Plants are extremely sensitive to touch, some of them even more than humans are.

Mechanosensing, sensitivity to mechanical stress, is a capacity of virtually all cells in a plant (Monshausen & Haswell, 2013: 4664). We should not forget that plants do not have a central neural center, therefore processing and possible reactions to mechanical impulses are very different to ours. Having in mind that "mechanical signals contribute to most (if not all) aspects of plant development." (Hamant, 2013: 5). Perhaps the main lesson here is that plants are fully engrossed in sensing their environment through touch, literally with their entire bodies, and creating local and distributed responses at different speeds and intensities. It has been shown, for example, that growth is slowed or stunted by repeated touching or rubbing: "touch-induced growth inhibition is a general phenomenon in plant biology" (Chamovitz, 2012: 62).

Mechanically induced stress is inevitable in vegetal life, as plants are almost always exposed to strong mechanical stimuli from wind and rain. In other cases, such as in cross-pollination or carnivorous plants, touch is indeed welcomed or invited for. However, not any touch will do, it has to be of a certain intensity and situatedness, as well as temporality, and flowers are shaped in ways to encourage specific insect movements and distribution of pollen. Some plants are more able to withstand more stress and even adapt and profit from it, in all cases, it seems that mechanically-induced stress impacts all parts of the plant, altering their morphology and behaviour on multiple timescales.

Numerous experiments have shown that plants, such as pea plant, is able to *remember* touch trauma for weeks and months (in Chamovitz, 2012: 114-5), and recent experiments have confirmed that the sensitive species *Mimosa pudica* remembers habituation responses

even after 28 days (Gagliano *et al.*: 2014). Thus in fact, plants have long-term memory and are capable of learning beyond the stimulus-response, they engage in practice at least trial-and-error learning to adapt to the changing environment (Trewavas, 2009: 612). It is interesting to note that plants that are evolving most rapidly among all others are the climbing plants (Mancuso & Viola, 2014: 33), plants that learn intensely through their touching sensoria. Touch-response-ability is a dynamic ever-evolving performance in the plant kingdom, developed with and alongside other bodies. This opens up an important but sensitive territory for human intra-activity.



5. mirko nikolić, *im/ponderabilia*, exhibited at *Good Vibrations*, curated by Elina Suoyrjö at SIC Space, Helsinki // 29 April - 28 May 2017

Now we return to the question of artistic intra-actions with vegetals. In performance art that is grounded in (human) social context it is understood that touch is an affective and

liminal experience, entering another person's 'zone.' As an illustrative example, in 1977 at the entrance of Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna at Bologna, two humans—artists Marina Abramović and Ulay— stood facing each other in a narrowed entrance. They were naked, and in between them there was only just a foot or so of space. In order to enter the gallery, the audience had to squeeze themselves laterally, thus facing one of the performers and brushing against them with the front and the back of the body. The performance *Imponderabilia* was interrupted by police after 90 minutes.

In May 2017, in Gallery SIC in Helsinki, two plants—one *Asparagus densiflorus* and one *Hedera helix*—hung opposite each other at human chest height in a narrow passage lined up with organza textiles. The plants were peeping with their branches through holes made in fabric. To protect plants from excessive gaze, their niches were surrounded by satin curtains creating a boudoir atmosphere. Due to constraints of capitalism on culture, textiles used were polyesters, but some dyes which colored them probably were of organic origin. The framework of the construction was made of wood. Thus, various forms of plant non/life were standing, and even before reaching the living plants, the spectator was confronted with the vegetal world. In this 'vegetalised' version of *Im/ponderabilia*, composed by mirko, the audience had to make a choice similar as in Marina and Ulay's piece, which plant-person to face, which to brush with the chest and which with the back. And by which plant to be brushed. The audience had the choice not to pass through and turn back.

Touching a stranger in public is a limit experience in performance art, a challenge to comfortable distances maintained in normalised daily life. With plants, socially speaking, this distance is at the same time inexistent and vast. Following the complexity of plants' receptivity and being briefly sketched above, touching a plant should be taken at least as seriously. As we shall see, some artistic practices seem to imply that touching plants automatically create intimacy, but this is an anthropocentric presumption, for in case of the

humans, this indeed mostly is the case. Very few plants have the ability to run away or bite if they are not 'complicit' with the interaction.



6. mirko nikolić, *im/ponderabilia*, exhibited at *Good Vibrations*, curated by Elina Suoyrjö at SIC Space, Helsinki // 29 April - 28 May 2017

Digital media has been a particularly open field for experimentation with vegetal beings. Interactive installation *Akousmaflora* (2007) by Scenocosme invites visitors to touch leaves and branches of different potted plants hanging from the ceiling. As a result of human touch, the electrostatic difference between fingertips and plants is via a digital interface translated into sound. The sounds are mostly pleasurable and intriguing, but also possibly problematic renderings that feel a lot like rainforest birds (animalisation). Touch is very much taken for granted here. Now, the artists in their statement, say that sometimes it is sufficient not to touch the plant, but to come close. However, the visitors perform all sorts of more or less violent movements, even when the sound becomes a sort of drumming which could indicate the plant's feeling of pain. Since these interactions are part of the artists' presentation of the work, the artists see these interactions as unproblematic. Therefore, we would say that this work is far from what the artists describe as "alliance between nature and digital technology." Even more problematic is the now-classic digital artwork by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau *Interactive Plant Growing* (1992) where touching plants or coming close to them, again through measurement of electrostatic difference, creates visualisation on the screen. In fact, artist themselves describe the plants as "natural and tangible interface" between visitors and technology (in Ryan, 2015: 46-7). Here plants are fully at service of human authors and visitors, even though they are made into actors. Inclusion does not mean liberation. We find a much more responsible and responsive approach in Terike Haapoja's interactive installation *Dialogue* (2007/2013) where the very breathing of humans inside a room with trees triggers a whistle-like response, thus intensifying the everyday circulation of carbon-dioxide. Touching does not need to occur directly, but can be mediated more subtly, for example, via carbon-dioxide and oxygen. Intensity that is more attuned to vegetals can be seen in Špela Petrič's *Skotopoiesis* (2015) where the artist casts shadow on cress for 12 hours a day. The work challenges both the plant bodies that need to grow in reduced light conditions but also "the vegetalized artist shrinks." (Petrič, 2015) Bodies are affectively touched by each other, at a distance, and are touched by forces of light and gravity. This is an uneasy, "potentially unsuccessful intercognition," (ibid.) accurate and critical of the times of Anthroscene or Plantatiocene.

As more affirmative engagements with vegetal bodies through touch occur, we can look at Annette Arlander's developing body of works where she 'stands with' trees, bushes, and also earthly formations for extended periods of time. Arlander is engaged in a series of performances in various locations as part of her research project *Performing with plants - Att sam-ägera med växter* (2017-19). In one of the pieces in this series, *Tree Calendar* (2017), Arlander visits a tree and spends time with it, sitting in its branches, standing next to it, or embraced by it in the case of bushy trees. In other 'experiments' as part of this research project she 'visits' the same tree many times. Her blog posts vividly describe how she tries to find a way to approach each plant in question, looking for a position, and also trying to find an adequate angle from which to video document the piece. This use of technology creates a potential tension between the performativity and representation, but let us stay with touch. Anna Rubio's performances involve different modes of touching trees, from caressing to literally acrobatic exercises with ropes and climbing gear, such as swinging from the branches of a huge apple tree in *All the Trees I Met* (2014-16). Rubio here explores the dynamic of being offspring of the tree: "I'm an apple suspended, a red one. I'm playing with my fragility, with sensuality and gravity just before falling down" (2016). Branches and trunks of some trees are indeed bodies more ready to welcome humans, and in Arlander's and Rubio's tree performances the human bodies become more like smaller climbing plants that seek support from the bigger cousins.

Essi Kausalainen, in her words, seeks to perform "the plant logic" by working out through long-term practice with vegetal bodies, she calls this "a professional relationship" "stained all over by my dangerous desires and love." (2017) Diagonally to the discourses of becoming-plant, Kausalainen acknowledges: " Obviously the attempt to perform plant logic is doomed to fail, but as an artist I am interested in the aesthetics and actions (and the joy!) this attempt produces." (ibid.) Joy is central here, and the artist understands it as an affective intra-action among the bodies, not as pertaining to the human subject. These are shared knowings that stem from 'vegetal wisdom,' one can get involved in them with

humbleness and response-ability. Kausalainen continues: “The vegetal kingdom doesn’t care much about me, and yet it does in its own, particular way.” (ibid.) Humans are not the central concern in vegetal life, or, to be fair, they should not be. Plants do not crave to get included on the human art scene, they are engrossed in extraordinarily complex performances with multitudes of other more interesting bodies. However, thanks to vegetal hospitality and openness, there is space and time for humans to become a part in it. Through painstaking and intense processes of forming ‘common notions,’ some of us subtly can engage with the plants in the way that come closer to how bees or mychorriza do. This begins with giving oneself away, as when Kausalainen simply embraces the grass in a gesture of abandon in her *Garden Works I* (2011). Or, like Malin Arnell in *Spring Lips of Transposed Desire* (2011), the artist “acts out autoerotic fantasies on a tree covered in fungus”, in an inter-species expression of queer desire. The video performance is an intense burst of sexuality, and also an ironic play on amateur porn where nature is just a backdrop. Here it is a radically other body - a fungus and the tree that holds it - that is the subject of the artist’s lips curlings. Consensuality and freedom can be questioned here from the fungal and vegetal side, but intensity might also melt the possible affective in/difference. Touching surfaces are many, and they are not always exterior. In Ruta Vitkauskaite, Karl Heinz Jeron & Bartaku’s *Aronia M. Ouverture* (2014), the extract of aronia berry is put in touch with palate, but intra-action is not that much about taste and eating. The berry’s astringent properties modify human voicing properties, thus making an *Unchoir* of inhuman sounds. As a signpost, these interkingdom affective encounters should be led under the idea of “organising enjoyment” together and apart, which amounts to “becom[ing] fascinated by enhancing and expanding nonhuman pleasure modes,” as nicely put by Timothy Morton (2017: 136).

Direct access into the vegetal performativity is not easy, an alternative line is to get involved into the existing affective assemblages, such as the entanglement between plants and pollinators. A long-term project by Christina Stadlbauer and Ulla Taipale *Melliferopolis* (2012 -) spreads knowledge and celebrates bees-plants alliance through workshops and

performances at the interface between arts and sciences. Here touching intra-actions with plants unfurl together with bees who have mastered this type of intra-action. A lot of slow knowledge is needed, and sciences are an ally here. We learn from Natasha Myers' interviews with plant scientists the extent to which they get 'vegetalised' in the process of turning attention to the plants (2015). Quicker pathways tend to reproduce hierarchy, such as in Pony Express' popular interactive environment *Ecosexual Bathhouse* (2015-6) where they play with queer and BDSM aesthetics to get humans enticed into affective intra-actions with vegetals. In some environments, the spectators are asked to touch flowers with gloves to pollinate manually, but in most cases it seems that touches are just for humans' fun. It is attractive, but possibly mostly or only for vertebrates.

Touch offers a possibility for response-ability, of becoming-otherwise. It is always difference that is being touched, the inhuman in us, and the non-vegetal in plants too (Barad, 2012a). For many bodies the very chances of growth and possibilities of thriving are at stake. There are no abstract knowledges here, each plant has its own unique, singular dynamics, which demands humbleness and attentiveness akin to that of Charles Darwin's experiments, but more delicate still, more devoted and mutualistic, with indeterminacy at heart. It is about subtleness and molecularity—both chemical and non-identitarian—plants are attuned to affective touches with bodies lighter and more minute than ours. It might well be the case that humans are not (yet) prepared to directly touch many plant species without doing them harm. An aesthetics of touch begins from 'zones of proximity' or 'neighbourhood' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 273), and only through affective complicity this field might fold into a 'zone of indiscernibility' (ibid.: 280). There are other ways of touching and being touched beyond the mechanical ones, and fingers are not the only surface of touch, lungs can tickle too, even deeper. Perhaps the first step is then, with *Ecosexuals* Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, to "talk dirty" to the plants. Whisper raunchy thinkings-feelings. Be a tiny little wind or a droplet of rain to a plant. Tree trunks are more ready to accept our bodies, thus "hug and stroke her trees" freely (Sprinkle & Stephens, 2008). Be a support for a climbing plant, feel a pea plant extend its coil towards you, but if

you are to accept this advance, you need to be ready to remain still and become a support structure. Practices of dispersed attentiveness mean opening the entire body, becoming response-able to that wasp that lands on your shoulder. Perhaps she thought you were a flower. Exposing oneself to touch in interspecies context is to re/play with in/determinacy once again. Each touch carries a possibility of invitation—accepted or declined, hesitant or fervent—from multiple sides, as such it is a critical space of a natureculture of radical immanent hospitality.



7. *for a pluriverse in transit*. Photo: mirko nikolić, 2017.

4. Conclusions

Vegetal performativity—ontology of performance of the vegetal world—decisively pushes against theories of performance that are based on semiotics as the primary mode of expression. It represents an alternative mode to that of J.L. Austin’s ‘speech-acts;’ plants perform through ‘intra-affect-acts.’ This mode of performativity, however, does not sit easily within any of the present theories that we have at hand. We have outlined how vegetal performativity aligns with but also challenges affect theories, especially their inherent human animal presumptions. Plants give little heed to any notion of autonomous subject, and thereby are more in tune with lineages of affect theory that are interested in ‘transmission of affect.’ However, vegetals can’t fit squarely within this generous framework

either without bending it even further to house an openness that is individual and common—atmospheric—more precisely. Plants are beings of intra-action but their hospitality and response-ability seem to transgress any possibility of a settled agential cut, their differentiation does not formalise into subjectivities and objectivities. In their local intra-actions bring into play the whole earth, they intra-act response-abilities with multitudes of elements, and, in doing so, they play out the possibilities of thriving and nurturing of the world beyond their own specific body. They are interested in producing difference, in liminal experiences, this is how they perpetuate atmospheres of joy, even being open to the possibility of their own decay. In line with the radical immanence of vegetal being, vegetalised practices need to move through theoretico-practical exploration with forms of hospitality, response-ability and openness that are radically asubjective and transcorporeal. Arts have much to offer, especially in conjunction with plant sciences. One line of becoming that we have individuated, a possibility for true shared conversations with the vegetal realm is the realm of touch. Touch is one of the most sensitive and open territories where human animals can ‘get involved’ in this mode of performance. Vegetal touching is everywhere always already in intra-affect-action, enveloping us all, yet human animals are still newcomers to the arts of vegetalised response-ability. With a beginner’s mind, and fervent desire of vegetalisation, inhuman touches might enact ‘active affirmations’ of radical difference as collective multispecies joy.

Thanks:

We would like to thank the organisers of the COST Action IS1307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on ‘How Matter Comes to Matter,’ for allowing us to delve deeper into the ideas around new materialisms at the annual conference, workgroup meetings and training schools. The article has been very much improved thanks to generous and inspiring feedback by the double blind peer reviewers. Thanks for support to Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa -Kontturi, and Natasha Myers. Mirko would like to thank Marianna Szczygielska and Olga Cielęmecka for invitation to “Plantarium” where some of

the ideas have been tested, and to Anette Arlander, Bartaku, Christina Stadlbauer and Essi Kausalainen for a long-term companionship and support in getting to know and understand the vegetal being. In hope of future shared conversations with all of you.

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