It Rains – It Thinks – It Dances

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It was a great pleasure to present the video work *Rainy Day in Rekdal (With a Downy Birch)* (15 min. 20 sec) in the context of the conference Tanz der Dinge/Things that dance, both as a screening and as a two-channel installation together with *Grey Day in Rekdal (With a Downy Birch)*. These works are part of an artistic research project called "Performing with Plants," which moves between performance art, environmental art and media, and is rather marginal in a dance context. Instead of presenting the project as a whole or discussing its new materialist underpinnings, I showed the video *Rainy Day in Rekdal (With a Downy Birch)* from 2017 as an example of matter dancing and presented some thoughts as a kind of voice-over text, here abbreviated into the main points and extended with some ideas by Michael Marder.

The work was originally made as a preparatory experiment for creating a companion piece to the video *The Tide in Kian Tiang* (2016), which was performed every hour during one day. In that work I wanted to experience the tide together with a small tree, growing in a rocky cove near Kan Tiang beach on Koh Lanta in Thailand. The sequel on Lofoten, in Northern Norway, was supposed to record the tide together with a small downy birch growing on the shore in the village called Rekdal. The video *Grey Day in Rekdal* was performed during one day, 20th July 2017, every hour, sharing repeated moments of relative stillness with the birch, resulting in a rough time-lapse video. The one-off real-time session called *Rainy Day in Rekdal*, however, made in the same place the day before, is more interesting in this context. The drops of water hitting the lens take over as the main performers of the work, in a rather classic manner, and obscure the human posing with the downy birch, forming a dance of their own. Thus, the work is a good example of the agency of matter (water in this case) and technology (the automatic functions of the camera) and their *intra-action*,[1] to use a term coined by Karen Barad (2007),

1 Intra-action is a term coined by physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad to replace the usual term inter-action, which presumes that the interacting parts pre-exist the action (like the actors in actor network theory). Intra-action "*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*" (Barad 2007: 33, italics in original).

as well as one kind of exercise in *becoming-with*,[2] to use an expression by Donna Haraway (2016). One of the core questions I explore as part of the ongoing artistic research project called "Performing with Plants," is whether it actually is possible to perform with plants, to perform "with" them, that is, how can I respect plants as my collaborators?

Fig. 1: Annette Arlander, Rainy Day in Rekdal – Grey Day in Rekdal, *two-channel installation. Karlsruhe University Institute of Sports and Sport Science, 2018. Photo: Annette Arlander.*

In his book *Plants as Persons, a Philosophical Botany* (2011) Matthew Hall argues for "recognizing plants as subjects deserving of respect as other-than-human persons" and "advocates including plants within human ethical awareness," reminding us that an ethic constitutes an ideal of human behaviour. "In an ecological context, moral action is enacted respect and responsibility for the well-being of the others with whom we share the Earth" (Hall 2011: 13). He further asks: "What shape should human-plant ethics take? How can we move from a stance of exclusion and domination to one of inclusion and care? How can plants be incorporated into di-

2 Becoming-with is a notion utilized by Donna Haraway to emphasize that "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations […] We become-with each other or not at all." (Haraway 2016: 4)

alogical relationships?" (2011: 156) This last question is one of the core problems in performing with plants.

Hall recommends "the recognition of plants as other-than-human persons," as "a powerful way of incorporating plants within social and moral relationships of care and nurturing" although "unlike in the animal rights theory," he notes, "persons are not exempt from use" (2011: 161). We cannot avoid eating plants. "Understanding that plants are active, self-directed, even intelligent beings," Hall notes, "must be realized through working closely with plants in collaborative projects of mutual benefit" (2011: 169). Seen as a nonhuman person in this manner, the downy birch and my attempt at performing with it could be understood as an attempt at contact or a gesture of respect, even if not directly a collaborative project of actual mutual benefit, particularly not for the birch.

For this example, following Hall, and regarding this downy birch as an "other-than-human person" to enter into a temporary dialogical relationship with, makes sense, although this kind of approach might not be as easy with regard to other types of vegetation. It is relatively easy to relate to the small downy birch as an individual, but what about the meadow with the yellow flowers and the grass? In contrast to this idea of extending personhood to plants one could think of a new materialist understanding of the birch, the human and the rain not as pre-existing objects or entities, but as produced by specific intra-actions and agential cuts of exclusion and inclusion.

Instead of extending personhood to plants one could also think with philosopher Michael Marder, who emphasizes the dispersed life of plants and challenges humans to recognize the planthood in themselves, with his notion of vegetal democracy, a principle that concerns all species without exception. The division of the world into mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms, "the great chain of being," with rocks at the bottom and humans at the top, is a traditional stratification that influences our way of making and understanding performances. In his study *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) Marder offers a critique of this legacy by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics. For Marder thinking is not the sole privilege of the human subject, which leads him to introduce the notion *it thinks*:

> In place of the Kantian transcendental synthesis of I think that supposedly accompanies all my representations, plant-thinking posits it thinks, a much more impersonal, non-subjective, and non-anthropomorphic agency. (Marder 2013: 165)

The vegetal *it thinks*, which might mean for instance a tree that thinks, refers to a much more undecided subject as well, like in the expression it rains. Marder invites us to "try to get accustomed to the idea that thinking is not the sole prerogative of the subject, or of the human being" (2013: 165). Accordingly, this "non-identical thinking" – "aside from altering the form of thought (which be-

comes inseparable from its opposite, the non-thought)" and besides "changing its content (which includes contradictions)" – will also indicate "freedom from the substantive and self-enclosed identity of the thinkers themselves" (2013: 165).

It thinks is not concerned with "who or what does the thinking?" but "when and where does thinking happen?," Marder explains (2013: 169), because it arises from and returns to the plant's embeddedness in its environment. The plant does not have to "cordon itself off from its surroundings, to negate its connection to a place," in order to "fully become itself as a consequence of this oppositional stance." On the contrary, a vegetal being "must remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows," and its relationship to its surroundings is receptive rather than domineering (2013: 69). The leaves turn their surface towards the light, and the roots burrow into the soil, imbibing nutrients as well as poisonous substances.

Marder notes how, in their rhizomatic thinking, Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge the wisdom of plants, in their manner to always form rhizomes with something else, such as the wind, animals, or human beings. Rhizomatic thinking is thus the "thinking of exteriority in and as exteriority, the inextricable relation to 'an outside', to something other," which includes elements of "inorganic nature, other living beings, and the products of human activity" (2013: 168). Marder responds to Deleuze and Guattari's injunction, "Follow the plants!," by engaging in "irreverent plant-thinking […] on the path of becoming-plant." He notes that "a human who thinks like a plant literally becomes a plant," because "the destruction of classical *logos* annihilates the thing that distinguishes us from other living beings" (2013: 165).

Marder suggests that his reflections on vegetal intelligence and plant thinking should be taken as a footnote to Nietzsche's recommendation to begin with "the 'sagacity' of plants" when searching for new principles of evaluation (2013: 151). He further notes how the re-evaluation of all values "after the de-centering of the human" requires a complete change of our beliefs regarding notions like "knowledge" and "truth," and the objective validity of knowledge. It demands "the unmooring of the conditions of possibility for knowing from human subjectivity" (2013: 151 f.). Humans are not the only creatures capable of knowing and thinking. In order to begin with the "sagacity" of plants Marder tries to understand their mode of being, "transposing the functions of the vegetal soul onto the discourse of thinking," formulating "the tenets of epistemophytology" in search for a post-metaphysical way of thinking, in order to understand "the suppressed vegetal sources of human thought" (2013: 152). Marder suggests that

> plant-thinking happens (1) *when* the presumed self-identity of 'subjects' and 'objects' that populate a given milieu recedes, allowing a rhizomatic assemblage to surge up to the foreground, to be activated by sharing difference among its various nodes, and (2) *where* the spacings and connections, communication lines and

> gaps between the participants in this assemblage prevail over what is delimited within them. (Marder 2013: 169)

The implications of plant thinking are summarized in a poetic phrase: "When *it thinks*, it does so non-hierarchically and, like the growing grass, keeps close to the ground, to existence, to the immanence of what is 'here below'." (2013: 169) And this approach defines the thinker as well: "At the core of the subject who proclaims: 'I think', lies the subjectless vegetal *it thinks*, at once shoring up and destabilizing the thinking of this 'I'." (2013: 170) So, following this line of thought things not only dance, they think as well. And conversely, perhaps we could say that it rains, it thinks, or – it dances.

References

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