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Looking at (Overlooked) Lichen: Visual Journaling as Part of Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees

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ABSTRACT

The daily practice of photographing lichen on bark developed from my interest in the bark of trees during the project *Performing with Plants* (2017-2019) and continued during the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (2020-2021). In this essay I return to these visual fieldnotes, compare the visual diary on Flickr with my previous journals on social media, and consider the potential of such practices for developing awareness of and a respectful relationship to other beings that we share this planet with.

KEYWORDS

lichen; trees; visual notes;
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media

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The daily practice of photographing lichen on bark in 2020 developed from my interest in the bark of trees as part of the artistic research project *Performing with Plants* (2017-2019). Continuing with the practice, I was archiving 4 (sometimes up to 24) images of lichen on tree trunks daily on Flickr, during my next project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*. Because my interest in lichen was a sidetrack to my main concern, working with trees, this diary or journal, like an extensive collection of visual fieldnotes, has remained largely unexplored. Like lichen growing on the tree trunk, this visual diary has existed as a sidetrack of my main work with a life of its own and requires a shift in scale to be noticed and appreciated. In this visual essay I return to the material and compile the images into a series of grids that give an idea of the huge variety and beauty of lichen. I compare this practice with my previous approaches to visual journaling in social media and consider the potential of such daily practices in helping to develop a respectful relationship to other beings that we share this planet with. How come such spectacular beings like lichen are so often overlooked, even when trying to focus on them? Even when trying to look at them, these images of lichen did not increase my knowledge or understanding of lichen in any real manner, besides supporting an aesthetic appreciation of their variety. Importantly, however, such a practice of looking for lichen and the results of such small acts of repeated recording produce a substantial

amount of material almost as a side-effect of life. Not all of it visually interesting, not all of it technically high quality, not all of it meaningful in any deeper sense, but nevertheless valuable by the accumulated alternatives, producing repetition with variation, and supporting the process of research.

In another context I have performed with lichen, or rather with seaside cliffs colored by lichen (Arlander, 2016b) and worked with the shift in scale, juxtaposing images of the landscape with close-ups of lichen. I have discussed the work in the context of site-specificity and sympoiesis (Arlander, 2018) and suggested that performing with lichen is a good example of 'becoming with' because lichen are products of a symbiotic relationship between fungi and algae. All lichen are composite organisms that consist of algae or cyanobacteria living in a symbiotic relationship with the filaments of fungi and they also have properties that differ from those components. Some of the toughest life forms on the planet are lichen and they can survive in the harshest of circumstances (Arlander, 2018). In that project I was mesmerized by the bright yellow color of the lichen on the seashore. In the daily practice discussed here I was interested in the huge variety of lichen growing on trees.

The images I have chosen for this essay are all taken in 2020, uploaded on Flickr and organized in groups by the month in the order they were uploaded, none omitted, (including occasional images out of focus or otherwise blurry) to highlight the grid-like pattern I preferred. It would be possible to look at the differences based on location, like February-March in Johannesburg, where lichen growing on tree trunks were rather rare, in contrast to the abundance of lichen on the tree trunks in the old-growth forest near Mustarinda house in northeastern Finland in September or in the national park on Örö Island in November. Such a use of the diary seems rather trivial in retrospect, because I have documented my stay in those residencies more fully on the project blog. A more interesting question is the effect of the practice itself on the person engaged in it, including the rather cumbersome practice of compiling the diary afterwards, and the effect of the resulting visual pattern on the viewer. The practice of looking for and at lichen has value as an activity, besides producing a diary and a mass of relatively consistent image material. The following examples are organized in one album for each month. In order to appreciate

the variety of lichen and moss, look at these monthly compilations via the provided links.

Images of lichen (all photographs by the author):

January 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719793913824>

February 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719857469550>

March 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719804458724>

April 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719857533660>

May 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719804492519>

June 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719857561015>

July 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719802602943>

August 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719802608763>

September 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719857579585>

October 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719815264387>

November 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719804710642>

December 2020

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/albums/72157719808144826>

The context for these visual fieldnotes was my interest in trees, which I briefly present in the following.



MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE AND UNREMARKABLE TREES

How to rethink our relationship to other life forms that we share this planet with is one of the core questions for art and philosophy today, and thus also for artistic research. In the project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (Arlander, 2020a), I encounter individual trees that are remarkable in their context or rather unremarkable and spend time with them alone or together with the public in order to create video works and video essays. The project is further developing experiences from the artistic research project *Performing with Plants* (Arlander, 2016a)¹ as well as some previous publications discussing performing with trees (Arlander, 2010; 2015; 2019; 2020) and what that might mean.

The title of the project alludes to the photography book *Meetings with Remarkable Trees* by Thomas Pakenham (1996) and the project is in some sense forming a counterpoint to it, by questioning what is remarkable and worthy of attention and what is unremarkable, unnoticed and overlooked, with a special focus on trees. The medium in this project is not photography, however, but rather performance for video and recorded voice.

Although we are often accused of ‘not seeing the forest for the trees’, this project wants to look at the opposite danger, not seeing the trees for the forest, and focus on individual trees. This is not to deny that trees form networks and ecosystems or symbiotic relationships with other trees and with fungi, bacteria and all kinds of micro-organisms, serve as hosts for numerous life-forms including lichen, and are in a constant exchange with their environment, as humans are as well. Nor the fact that forests or woods or substantial areas of trees, including old-growth forests, are needed for sustaining biodiversity, producing effective carbon sinks, cooler and fresher urban air, flood resistance and more.

Emphasizing individual trees is a risky strategy in our current neoliberal capitalist

society, where the importance of individualism is usually exaggerated. To focus on singular trees can nevertheless be important as a first step towards decolonizing our relationship with ‘nature’. As late ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2003) pointed out, colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and to see ‘them’ as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualised. Thus, attending to particular trees might work as a way to help us see trees as life forms that we have much in common with, despite our undeniable differences, to remind us of our joint participation in *zoe*², to use Rosi Braidotti’s (2017) term.

Artistically the project can be placed at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and video or media art, in the encounter of traditions – performance art’s emphasis on embodied presence, video- and media art’s valuing of repetition, transformation and critical reflection on technology as well as environmental art’s sensitivity to the possible effects and side effects an artwork can have. The daily practice discussed here, almost a sidetrack to the main project, could perhaps better be linked to efforts at blurring art and life (for example Arlander, 2017; Kaprow, 2003; Tikkaaja, 2021).

In scholarly terms the project could be situated within the emerging field of critical plant studies, which has been linked to art’s return to vegetal life and to looking at plants in art (Aloi, 2018; Gibson & Brits, 2018; Gibson, 2018). Other discussions have focused on plant rights (Hall, 2011), plant thinking (Irigaray and Marder, 2016; Marder, 2013) and plant philosophy (Coccia, 2019). There is a current ‘plant turn’ in science, philosophy and environmental humanities (Gagliano, Ryan & Vieira, 2017; Myers, 2017; Vieira, Gagliano & Ryan, 2015), followed by an abundance of popular accounts of recent scientific research on plant sentience, intelligence, memory and communication (Chamovitz, 2017; Gagliano, 2018; Mancuso & Viola, 2015; Pollan, 2002; Simard, 2021; Wohlleben, 2016).³

Plants and vegetation are receiving increased attention in the context of the current



climate crises and the rapid extinction of species. Rethinking our relationship to other forms of life that we share this planet with is a central task for artists today, and artist-researchers, too, are looking at plants in new ways. Artistic research can contribute through its capacity to allow and to generate hybrid forms of thinking and acting. The project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* wants to contribute to this discussion with examples of relatively simple artistic practices, which are shared as artworks and described in journal articles as well as visual essays, like the one at hand.

In the project so far, I have experimented with various approaches, partly based on my previous work. My main strategy earlier was creating year-long time-lapse videos, which I have now transformed into time-lapse videos of a day or a month with specific trees. Some new explorations, like the yoga-based balancing exercise ‘becoming tree’ repeated next to a tree daily for a month, inviting people to present or perform with their chosen trees, as well as the practice of writing letters to trees next to the trees have emerged during the project. The visual journaling that I focus on here has been more of a private working tool, a diary of snapshots as field notes, a daily routine, not aimed at producing art works, necessarily, but as a way of gathering material, like picking berries, without yet knowing whether they will be used to make jam or a pie. Basically, the images were made to be shared in social media alongside ‘the real work’, the videos. Next, therefore, some background to my use of visual online diaries.

VISUAL DIARIES AND PHOTO COLLECTIONS

Overwhelmed by the constant flow of images on social media, without any logic whatsoever, I wanted to experiment with some kind of focus, to use a media feed to create a work or story or ongoing performance of sorts,

and to adapt to the scale of an image on a phone. The first platform I used for a photo diary was Instagram. A small red arrow painted on a pebble, pointing at water in some manner, was the main character in a series of images, beginning in 2015. For the project *Performing with Plants*, I introduced a new protagonist, a small dry grenadine that I had brought home as a souvenir, and now painted with a golden star to mark it as special. The Instagram feed of the small ‘seedball’ in various places was linked to the project archive on the Research Catalogue with the rubric “Photos: a small fruit or a big berry”.⁴ The story of the seedball was not a daily practice or duty, however, but rather an occasional ‘hobby’.

As part of the project *Performing with Plants*, in 2017, I wanted to create a visual diary, a daily focus on plants, and to have it on a separate platform. Not really familiar with social media, I chose Tumblr. The main purpose was to focus attention of the omnipresence of plants in various forms. The first year (2017) the Tumblr diary was called Year One With Plants⁵ and consisted of one image of a plant of some kind every day. The second year (2018), Year Two With Plants⁶, I expanded the idea to include everything from tomatoes to wooden tables. In Year Three With Plants⁷ (2019) I concentrated on trees, on their crowns photographed from underneath the tree. This third series seemed more relevant and meaningful due to the constrictions, which created some consistency. Looked at in retrospect the completely idiosyncratic choices of the first two years are actually more fascinating in their quirkiness and also reveal more about the way plants are part of our lives.

For the project *Meetings with Remarkable or Unremarkable Trees* I created a fourth blog on Tumblr, *Meetings with Trees*⁸, which I continued with in 2020 and 2021. My focus was first on the leaves of trees, then on fruits or seeds, then on buds and finally on leaves again. The practice of taking a snapshot for the diary turned into a routine, a daily duty among



other tasks. The accumulated collection of images nevertheless forms a diary of sorts.

In the year 2020 I introduced a new performer on Instagram, a small pinecone. In contrast to the diaristic daily images on Tumblr these Instagram posts are sporadic reactions and conceived more like performances, with the same object appearing as a character in various circumstances. Besides these experiments with scale, a smaller than human perspective, I created another Instagram account, (@meetings_with_trees) where I post brief video clips of trees with vertical image format, beginning from the base of the tree and following its trunk to the crown, thus literally recording my encounters with trees. The need to create a new account for this new type of posts illustrates my approach to social media; I am using each platform for a specific project. Limiting the use of one platform to one type of imagery is a way of creating consistency, of using repetition and accumulation as creative tools. For that reason, I needed one more platform for the images of lichen on tree bark.

LICHEN ON BARK

The visual diary on Flickr began with the bark of trees. Recording the bark of a tree seemed like the perfect contrast and complement to images of the tree as a whole, a close-up and detail that would give another perspective on the life of a tree. To record the bark of trees as a daily practice and uploading the images on a special account on Flickr I began on 27 July 2018 and I did it systematically from August 2018 onwards. Soon I settled into a way of taking four square images of the bark of a tree, from four directions around it, sometimes six or eight, and named them with the species and the place, like “birch on Harakka Island”, the date being added automatically by the platform. In 2018 and 2019 I continued with this daily practice, recording the bark of a tree every day. Sometimes there were interesting lichen growing on the bark, but that was not my

main focus. I also recorded daily video clips of bark during some months in 2019 and uploaded them on a page on the Research Catalogue,⁹ but abandoned this practice after a while, dissatisfied with the results, and continued with the snapshots only. From the beginning of 2020, I decided to record lichen growing on the bark of trees and abandoned the idea of moving around the trunks. The daily images in 2020 are of lichen growing on a new tree each day. I usually took four images, although the number of daily images of one tree grew up to twelve or sixteen even twenty-four over the year.

I combined the making of the lichen diary on Flickr with the tree diary on Tumblr, with images of lichen and of leaves taken from the same tree. The practice of recording lichen on bark soon turned into routine as well, rather than serving as a reminder to focus on trees and the diversity of lifeforms they support. Besides lichen I sometimes settled on moss, and in many instances the visual interest comes from the bark formations rather than the lichen, or at least their combination. In 2021 I changed my focus to wooden surfaces, details of things made of wood that could be photographed in close-up as a series of almost similar images with small variations, like bark, in order to show the ever-changing nature of wood as material. The images on Flickr, besides forming groups of decorative square surfaces, serve rather well as a diary simply because the platform highlights the date of photographing or uploading the images.

DISCUSSION

Using social media for specific performances is a possibility many performance artists have been exploring as a result of the restrictions related to the current pandemic. For those attuned to performance as an ephemeral event or to the responses of an audience, these dimensions can be provided by social media, too, at least to some extent. In my practice the archival aspect is more important. Rather than



the instant response, the satisfaction from the evidence that somebody actually looks at your work, which is important and nice of course, my main focus has been on recording, documenting and journaling, accumulating material and archiving my activities. The tendency to gather too much material, create too many alternatives, and to store them all without knowing what to do with them, can be held in check by selecting which images to post and discarding the others (or most of them). Because the various small projects for distinct platforms have their own themes and forms and aesthetic principles to follow, they also delineate and limit the choices available. And because they have the character of an ongoing activity, the need to produce something makes it easier not to be too demanding or critical. This is especially true with daily images.

Whether such daily practices have the potential to help develop a respectful relationship to other beings that we share this planet with is another matter. Based on my experience in the project so far, visiting trees repeatedly and performing a balancing exercise next to them or addressing trees by writing letters to trees while spending time with them or next to them have been more useful tools in generating a respectful relationship towards and appreciation of other beings, like trees. Taking snapshots of details of trees, like lichen growing on their bark, easily becomes a habitual activity, an almost absentmindedly completed routine, or some kind of hunt for images, which in the worst case creates an objectifying relationship to the tree – and the lichen on the tree as well. If, however, one manages to focus on the practice as an exercise in paying attention, it can be a useful daily reminder to look at and notice rather than overlook other creatures that we live together with and whose health and wellbeing we often forget we are dependent on. I can remember walking around looking for lichen in circumstances when they were scarce or looking for new varieties of lichen in circumstances when they were abundant. As a

practice to stop overlooking lichen and all the other small miraculous lifeforms in our environment, I would actually recommend looking at lichen and taking daily snapshot of them as an exercise.

When looking at the images of lichen afterwards, however, I actually regret not being a little bit more careful when creating them. When I scrutinize my dissatisfaction, it is not the practice itself that is the problem, nor the quality of individual images. The root cause of my discontent is the accumulated mass of images, which I have not found a 'solution' for, a way to transform them into an artwork. Although they were not meant to become a work to begin with, I still expect them to become material for an artwork in some way. In my usual practice of creating time-lapse videos, there is a similar kind of habitual routine, of accumulating material, and then, when the images are combined and edited, a transformation occurs, a kind of miniature miracle. And some kind of transformation is missing with these images. Perhaps I should keep experimenting, exaggerate the modernist grid or try to do something like a slide show, or whatever. Or then abandon all such efforts and accept that the real aesthetic context for these works is the social media platform they were posted on. Perhaps these various images are best appreciated as a carpet of more or less overlooked and colorful miniature creatures that you can scroll through as *divertissement*. You can compare the original media version with the monthly compilations above, and try the ultimate online experience, by scrolling down to the beginning of 2020 (the relevant material is posted between 1.1.2020 and 31.12.2020), and return from there: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/155751054@N03/>

Or, go out and find some lichen live, in 3D...

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The project was supported by Kone Foundation at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2017 and Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research Council) at Stockholm University of the Arts in 2018-2019.
- ² Rosi Braidotti has proposed *zoe* or non-human life – as opposed to the human *bios* – to be regarded as the ruling principle and introduced the notion “zoe-centered egalitarianism” as an aim for our relationship with other life-forms. She “displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for Anthropos, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animal and nonhuman life also known as zoe” (Braidotti 2017, p. 32).
- ³ For a more detailed presentation of the context see for example Arlander, 2019a; 2019b.
- ⁴ See Research Catalogue: <https://www.research-catalogue.net/view/316550/316551/5835/797>
- ⁵ Year One With Plants: <https://yearonewithplants.tumblr.com>
- ⁶ Year Two With Plants: <https://yeartwoplants.tumblr.com>
- ⁷ Year Three With Plants: <https://yearthreewith-plants.tumblr.com>
- ⁸ Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees: <https://meetingswithtrees.tumblr.com>
- ⁹ Bark videos: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/574690>