

Performing with Trees and the Tide – A Diffractive Reading

Annette Arlander

Stockholm University of the Arts

annette.arlander@uniarts.se / annette.arlander@uniarts.fi

Biography

Annette Arlander, DA, is an artist, researcher and pedagogue. She is presently professor of performance, art and theory at Stockholm University of the Arts (2018-2019), visiting researcher at Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki. For artworks, research and publications, see <https://annettearlander.com>.

Abstract

This text explores diffractive reading as a method combining two video works of performing with trees with some philosophical examinations of the specificities of vegetal being, asking whether performing with trees could increase our understanding of life forms and phenomena unlike us. Based on physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad's ideas on diffraction and philosopher Michael Marder's ideas of the challenges that plants present us with, this text weaves together experiences of two one-day performances for camera together with small trees on the seashore in Thailand in 2016 and on Lofoten in 2017. Juxtaposing descriptions of one video work with working notes from the process of creating another work, and interweaving these with theoretical remarks, the

text examines these examples of performing with trees using diffractive reading as a tool, while at the same time exploring diffractive reading as a method with the help of these examples.

Keywords

Diffraction, diffractive reading, performing with plants, vegetal being, one-day performance, performance for camera.

Performing with Trees and the Tide – A Diffractive Reading¹

Understanding the relationship between performer and environment from a post-humanist and new-materialist perspective prompts us to consider how to perform together with creatures, life forms and phenomena around us, including plants. Inspired by physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad's (2007; 2014) ideas on diffraction this text attempts a diffractive reading of philosopher Michael Marder's (2013; 2015) examination of the specificities of vegetal being, like the plant's relationship to place, and the challenges plants present us with, in combination with experiences of a small one-day performance for camera together with a tree on the seashore in Thailand, *The Tide in Kan Tiang* (2016) and a related experiment on the shore in Lofoten, *Grey Day in Rekdal* (2017). These examples of performing with trees could be understood as a response to the environmental crisis, involving rising sea levels as well as the complications created by mass tourism. The background to these works is a "stillness practice" at the intersection of performance art, environmental art and video art, that I have called performing landscape

¹This article is based on the text "Performing as a tourist - with trees" developed from the presentation at the seminar *Between Sky & Sea 2017: Tourist in Kvalnäs, Lofoten* on 18 July 2017, and planned to be published in a catalogue of the event, as well as on the paper "How to do things by performing with plants" in the panel organized by the research project *How to Do Things with Performance* at the IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research) conference *Unstable Geographies – Multiple Theatricalities* in Sao Paulo 10-14.7.2017

(Arlander, 2014a), although landscape should here be understood as environment more broadly, as nature-culture, as suggested by Donna Haraway and others.

Performing with

Already in *The Three Ecologies*, published in 1989, Felix Guattari (2000) wrote: “Nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between eco-systems. . . we must learn to think ‘transversally’”(p. 43) He reminds us of the mental and the social ecologies, besides the environmental one, that we usually think of when speaking of ecology, and insists that all three of them need to be considered together and as interconnected. He refers to Gregory Bateson, who in the strange collection of texts called *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*, published in 1972, explains his broad understanding of ecology: “Formally we thought of a hierarchy of taxa – individual, family line, subspecies, species etc. – as units of survival. We now see a different hierarchy of units – gene-in organism, organism-in-environment, ecosystems, etc. Ecology, in the widest sense, turns out to be the study of the interaction and survival of ideas and programs (i.e. differences, complexes of differences, etc.) in circuits.” (Bateson, 2000, p. 491) Or, to put it in brief: “What thinks is the total system which engages in trial and error. . . . The unit of survival is organism plus environment.” (p. 491) Guattari (2000), however, criticized and further developed Bateson’s idea of organism plus environment (or action plus context) by claiming that an action or rupture can also transform its context. (p. 54)

The idea of organism and environment as something given has been contested as well. Referencing studies on colonies of slime-mold, Karen Barad asks “[h]ow can we expect the notion of an organism understood as an individual that is situated in a container we call the environment to begin to speak to the complexity of the intra-active reconfiguring of bodily boundaries that defines the slime-mold’s astonishing material existence?” (Barad, 2012, p. 77). We are even more entangled with our surroundings than Bateson imagined.

For Barad (2007), discourse is not a synonym for language and meaning or intelligibility are not human-based notions. “Discursive practices are the material conditions for making meaning . . . [and] meaning is an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility.” (p. 335). According Barad bodies are not simply situated or located in certain environments, rather, environments and bodies are intra-actively co-constituted. “Bodies (‘human’, ‘environmental’ or otherwise) are integral ‘parts’ of, or dynamic reconfigurings of, what is”. (p. 170). Moreover, “human bodies, like all other bodies, are not entities with inherent boundaries and properties but phenomena that acquire specific boundaries and properties through the open-ended dynamics of intra-activity.” (p. 172). Intra-action in relation to artistic practice I have discussed elsewhere (Arlander, 2014b). It refers to the entanglement of components as the pre-condition rather than the result of an activity, in contrast with interaction, which relies on the metaphysics of individualism.

Despite efforts at rethinking the position of the human, the traditional 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 still influences our way of making and understanding performances. In his study *Plant-Thinking* philosopher Michael Marder (2013) offers a critique of this legacy by proposing a vegetal anti-metaphysics and coins the notion vegetal democracy, a principle that concerns all species without exception. For him “the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation” must “eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority” (p. 53). His view on cohabitation is relevant for the topic of performing with plants: “In keeping with twentieth century philosophy, living is ‘living with’, cohabitation in a community mediated not by the immutable bonds of common essence but by the non-essential (or better, pre-essential) difference inherent in existence.” (p. 50)

According Marder (2013), an inherent divisibility and participation are paramount in the life of plants; “the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being qua

being-with. Dispersed in acts of living, all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and are alive in the most basic sense insofar as they neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, /-/. If this is so then we have a lot to learn from plants that have mastered this way of being. . .” (p. 51). While analyzing the relationship of plants to their environment he observes that plants seem not to be obliged to separate themselves from their surroundings, to negate their connection to a place, in order to fully become themselves through this oppositional stance, like other types of subjectivity; on the contrary, a vegetal being must “remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows” and its relation to the elements is not domineering but receptive. (p. 69)

Taking as starting point this idea of “being with” and our interdependency with the environment, this text asks whether performing with trees could be used as a tool to generate experiences of increased understanding of life forms and phenomena unlike us, and help us in joining the “ongoing performance of the world”. The main aim of this text is to examine the idea of “performing with”, hinted at by the performances in question, using diffractive reading as a method, and to examine diffractive reading as a method using these performances as material.

Diffractive Reading

As a methodology diffraction was proposed by Donna Haraway as a counterpoint to the metaphor of reflection, because it suggests patterns of difference rather than an illusion of a fixed position, mirroring and sameness. (Barad, 2007, p. 29) For physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad (2007) diffraction is “not reflection raised to some higher power. . . not a self-referential glance back at oneself”, but among other things, “a tool for thinking about socialnatural practices in a performative rather than representationalist mode” (p. 88). Thus, diffraction as a concept owes as much to the feminist theorizing about difference as to physics, (Barad, 2014, p. 168) where

in its classical form it is understood as the result of the superposition or interference of waves. (Barad, 2007, p. 78-79) In quantum physics diffraction experiments are “at the heart of the ‘wave versus particle’ debates about the nature of light and matter” (p. 72-73) and have shown how “wave and particle are not inherent attributes of objects, but rather the atoms perform wave or particle in their intra-action with the apparatus.” (Barad, 2014, p. 180).

Thinking diffractively can imply a self-accountable, critical, and responsible engagement with the world, while reading diffractively can mean reading texts “through one another” to produce unexpected outcomes (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2016, para 4). Diffractive reading can be “a boundary-crossing, trans/disciplinary methodology”, which is “blurring the boundaries between different disciplines and theories to provoke new thoughts” (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2016, para 5). Diffractive reading could also be linked to the tradition of artistic cut-ups (Burroughs and Gysin, 1978), of literally cutting texts into pieces and recombining the fragments more or less randomly into collages, or new texts, although the emphasis is perhaps more on juxtaposition and montage, than blurring of boundaries.

In intertwining the experience of looking at an artwork and the experiences of making an artwork, with challenges proposed by a philosopher, I am trying to experiment with a simplified version of the technique Karen Barad (2014) uses in “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart”. After weaving together descriptions of historical moments in Santa Cruz, and texts by Gloria Anzaldúa, Trinh T. Minh-ha and herself into a conversation, she ends her exploration of quantum theory with a walk by the ocean and notes, how each grain of sand “is diffracted/entangled across spacetime.” (p. 184) Using such an important text as a model to emulate might seem like excessive hubris or at least inviting trouble. But, in some sense, that is what experimentation is about. . .

In the following this text uses a rough cut-up technique as a starting point for a diffractive reading, or perhaps a diffractive writing of sorts. The text consists of three parts, beginning with

this lengthy preamble with some background to the concepts used (performing with, diffractive reading). The second, diffractive part called “The Trees and the Tide”, intertwines a description of the video *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, working notes from the performance for camera for *Grey Day in Rekdal*, and some thoughts on plant thinking and vegetal being by Michael Marder. The idea was initially to explore an intertwining of texts; prompted by the reviewers, however, still images of each scene in both works are here added to the mix. The third part, “And Diffraction?” provides some concluding remarks.

The Trees and the Tide

A small tree grows in a rocky cove near Kan Tiang beach on the island of Koh Lanta in Thailand. On one of the last days of the year 2015 (on 26 December) I stand next to it for a day with one-hour intervals in order to experience the tide together with it. I cannot remember the details, but in a blog post “The Tide at Kan Tiang Beach” on December 27 2015 I read:

It was only a few hours before high tide, and a small tree was standing in the middle of the cove, growing right from the rock, or so it seemed. It would be standing in water by high tide, I assumed. So, I framed my image to include the tree, and used the horizon to divide the image into two halves, as I am accustomed to lately. Then I walked into the image and stood by the tree, and intuitively leaned against it, using it for support and comfort.

I decided to repeat the same image once every hour to record the changes produced by the tide and to use the time in between to record some images of rocks and water that could be combined into some sort of slow cross fade mix, perhaps. The tide never rose very high, and most of the day I spent recording the receding sea, which was not very spectacular, and searching for some shade in the intervals. (Arlander 27.12.2015)

One and a half years later,

[o]n Thursday morning 20 July, 2017, it is high tide in Rekdal, a village on the northern coast of Vestvågøy on Lofoten. I am planning to record the view on the shore together with a small birch every hour during this day, starting with high tide at 10.30 am (190 cm) and continuing through low tide at 4.50 pm (48 cm) to the next high tide at 11.10 pm. (198 cm), hoping for shifting weather, that is, some bursts of sun shine amidst the grey clouds. Changes in light conditions make it worthwhile; the shifts of the tide are not that visible since the sea is not very shallow in the spot I have chosen. (Arlander 20.7.2017)

In an article called “The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy” published in June 2012 philosopher Michael Marder (2012) considers plant ontology a barrier to empathy: “Humans, to be sure, join in communities, ecosystems, and rhizomatic assemblages *with* plants, but these multifaceted interactive formations do not usually involve a compassionate rapport. It is thus questionable whether one can be with the plants at all, precisely because the prospects of ‘suffering with’ them are severely restricted.” (p. 261) Unlike humans and other animals “plants live without a psychic interiority; they lack the metaphysical distinction between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ and do not set themselves in opposition to the environment that sustains them.” (p. 263) The “distance between the elusive principle of the plant’s vivacity and human existence seems, therefore, to forbid the kind of intimacy and identificatory projection of the I onto the other that are the cornerstones of empathy.” (p. 263)

In June 2017, before visiting Rekdal, I look at the video work *The Tide in Kan Tiang* (11 min 52 sec), while thinking of our dependency on plants for the oxygen we breath, for our nourishment, for the conditions of human life as we know it. I try to look at what is there, visible in the images...²

²Some of the details discernible in the video are not visible in the video stills.

10 am in Rekdal (or a few minutes before) – grey, grey, grey. Wind from the north, no sun any longer, half an hour before high tide, the top of the rock near the shore is still visible above water. No traffic on the road, but far away the sound of a motor boat heading out. There is already a path across the meadow formed by my repeated comings and goings between the camera and the tree. Before I go to stand with the birch I take a few still images of it. And then, afterwards, I only turn the camera and the microphone off and leave them standing on the tripod out there on the shore. Hopefully they will not attract the interest of seagulls or other birds. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 1. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 1, 10AM.

Marder (2012) distinguishes between compassion, pity and empathy; “[i]nstead of compassionately suffering with the other or sensing pity for the other, empathy bears upon the other’s psychic interiority, into which it probes by means of projective imagination.” (p. 262) Hence, “[w]hen humans empathize with plants, they, thus, ultimately empathize with themselves, turn-

ing the object of empathy into a blank screen, onto which essentially human emotions are projected.” (p. 263). So, empathy seems to be of no help in “performing with”.

The first image (fig.2) of *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, recorded at (approximately) 9 am, shows a tree on the right – what kind of tree? – and a woman in a sleeveless lilac T-shirt holding on to the tree with her right arm. There are saplings by the root and a small piece of bluish rag tied to a branch. On the far left a small sapling grows on the rock. The water is coming in, slowly, not yet reaching the tree.



Figure 2. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 1.

11 am in Rekdal, the same view, the same sea, the same sky, the same tree and the same grass. It is past high tide but I cannot see the difference. Perhaps the mountains on the horizon are a little bluer, but I could be imagining. The camera will register the nuances, though. Some seagulls pass by, and a caravan drives past behind me on the road, otherwise nothing is happening during my moment with the birch. Even the wind seems to have calmed somewhat. A long day ahead,

monotonous, but pleasant as long as it does not rain. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 3. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 2, 11AM.

Marder (2012) looks for a “non-anthropocentric grounding of vegetal ethics.” (p. 262) “How could one draw together the world of human beings and that of plants, while resisting the temptation to sacrifice the specificity of either perspective?” he asks. “What could fulfill the function of bridging the two worlds, all the while maintaining them apart and respecting the foreignness of vegetal life?” (p. 263)

The second image (fig. 4) of *The Tide...*, recorded at 10 am, shows the sun higher, the woman now standing in the shade of the tree, the water reaching to her ankles, flowing in over the rocks, covering most of them. Only part of the rock between the tree and the camera remains dry land. The sapling on the left is now in the water.



Figure 4. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 2.

Noon in Rekdal, the sun is shimmering through the clouds in the south, enough to create a shadow on the grass when I walk to the shore, enough to brighten the green on the grass and to strengthen the blue shade of the sea. The tide should be going out now, but I cannot see it in the bay with the birch; on the other side of the cliffs the beach is shallow and the seaweeds are showing up above the water. I wish for more sun, for the warmth it gives and for the contours it creates in the landscape. The wind from the north is not strong but chilly; there is nothing but the arctic sea that way; next stop Svalbard. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 5. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 3, noon.

Following Marder (2012), our task would be “to recognize in ourselves certain features of vegetal life, rather than to project the metaphysical image of human existence onto other life-worlds.” (p. 265) If “we register something of the plants in us . . . the failure of recognition, not to speak of self-recognition, becomes productive of an ethical relation to vegetal life.” (p. 265) Rather than seeing ourselves in a plant, we could begin by seeing the plantlike in ourselves.

The third image (fig.6) of *The Tide. . .* , recorded at 11 am, shows the water flooding most of the rocks, waves welling in, now nearly reaching the knees of the woman, who is placing her feet on the slippery rock, leaning her head against the trunk of the tree. The sapling on the left is now under water. There are some clouds in the sky; a long-tail boat with two people passes by from right to left close to the rocks.



Figure 6. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 3.

1 pm in Rekdal, grey. The pale sun hides behind the clouds that seem to have grown thicker again. The tide is slowly going out. A small white boat is coming across the bay, perhaps the neighbours were out on a tour. I am no longer expecting surprises, this seems to be a grey day throughout, only minute changes in the quality of light. No directions, no shadows, no stripes of sun moving across the mountains. Subtle shifts rather than dramatic effects. I chose a very generic piece of shore with no high cliffs or steep slopes in view, none of the features that make the landscape in this area so exciting. And now I can no longer change my mind. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 7. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 4, 1PM.

At the opening of the exhibition “Plant Science” in London, in May 2013, Michael Marder gave a talk, published in 2015 as “The Place of Plants: Spatiality, Movement, Growth” where he writes: “Here, in this place, human beings hoped not only to learn something *about plants*, but also to learn *from them* and perhaps even *with them*.” (Marder, 2015, p. 185)

The *fourth image* (fig.8) of *The Tide...*, recorded at noon, shows the water receding, still high, but not coming in any further. The sky is covered in thin clouds; the sea is pale, the woman a dark shape, almost in silhouette with the tree. A sailboat is barely moving on the horizon. The sapling on the left is visible again.



Figure 8. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 4.

2 pm in Rekdal, the weather as before, the wind a soft breeze now, the tide is going out, slowly. The meadow is very still, so quiet that I can hear somebody closing a car door on the road behind me. Here in the north it would have been fascinating, and easy, to record a full day and night, because there is light all night. For some reason, I was tied to the idea of the tide, of a companion piece to *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, which was only one day. The Tide in Rekdal does not sound as good. Because the tide is hardly distinguishable in the images, I could perhaps call the work *Grey Day in Rekdal*. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 9. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 5, 2PM.

Marder (2015) examines a tree's relationship to the environment: "What if a tree were ... the center point of its own world with a distinct orientation toward its environment? What if it actively inhabited and organized its place of growth, which, at the same time, molded it? In that case, the obliteration of its milieu would signify the end of a plant's world and of its life". (p. 186)

The fifth image (fig.10) of *The Tide...*, recorded at 1 pm, shows the dark rock of the shore in the foreground, the water has receded. The framing of the image is slightly altered; on the left the sapling can no longer be seen and on the far right a vague shape of a mountain is visible on the horizon. The sky is partly clouded; the sun glitters on the waves to the left.



Figure 10. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 5.

3 pm in Rekdal, a pale sun shimmering from behind the clouds, warming my neck as I stand with the birch on the shore. The tide is rather low now, revealing the pebbles and the seaweed on the shore, but the camera cannot see them, because of the high grass. The day is moving fast, it is already afternoon, but the evening will be long. At some point the sun will hide behind the mountain but will hopefully be visible again when it slides closer to the horizon in the north. These are the last days of the midnight sun here, they say. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 11. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 6, 3PM.

To our senses a plant does not move. But locomotion or change of place is only one of four types of movement for Aristotle, “the other three being growth, decay and change of state or metamorphosis”, Marder (2015, p. 186) points out. For him plants, animals and humans are all “growing beings” although “[t]he rhythms of growth, within and outside of us, diverge from those of human consciousness.” This “asynchrony between our attentive gaze and the movement of plants (as well as the physiology of our bodies) /–/ renders vegetal life so foreign to the vitality of animals and humans, whilst leaving us with the impression that plants are immobile.” (p. 187)

The sixth image (fig. 12) of *The Tide...*, recorded at 2 pm, shows the area of dark rock growing, the water receding further, the woman and the tree now standing on dry land. No wind, no waves, stillness. Little pools of water shimmer in the crevices on the rocks.



Figure 12. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 6.

4 pm in Rekdal, the wind is increasing again, the pale sun has moved towards west as expected, the tide is even lower now. For the camera, the shore looks the same. Funny that I chose a spot where the tide is invisible. Absurd to speak of the tide in Rekdal, when no tide whatsoever can be distinguished in the image. A slice of blue sky, however, has opened amidst the clouds, like a brushstroke of colour across the sky. And some white foam appears in the bay, where some underwater rocks are closer to the surface. This image I am repeating is so unspectacular that I wonder how I can relate to it or write to it, with it, for it. . . (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 13. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 7, 4PM.

“If to perform is necessarily to bestow a form, then performing growth is tantamount to performing the un-performable,” Marder (2015, p. 187) writes. It is, “[n]onetheless . . . possible to devise creative solutions that would diminish, if not overcome altogether, the time-lag between human and plant movements. Time-lapse photography can speed up the vegetal movement of growth” while “[t]he inverse process of our slowing down”, he adds, “will inevitably meet inflexible limits. Much as we wish, we cannot slow down enough to come anywhere close to the speed of vegetal growth.” (p. 187-88)

The seventh image (fig.14) of *The Tide. . .*, recorded at 3 pm, shows a pale sky and the sea almost white; the water shimmering far behind the black rocks, the tree and the woman now black, too. The framing has changed slightly; the sapling is visible again to the left; two boats move slowly on the horizon to the right. One tiny boat behind them moves faster, out of sight to the right. The tree catches the wind like a sail, swaying.



Figure 14. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 7.

5 pm in Rekdal, the tide is turning; there is more blue in the sky and the sea is thus bluer as well. Seagulls are screaming, the waves have foam when they reach the shore. In the image, the sky looks divided into two parts, a grey part and a blue part. In the unframed world around me, there are all kinds of clouds moving around. The mountains on the other side of the bay are decorated by their shadows. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 15. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 8, 5PM.

“If . . . the meaning of being is time, then denying the plant its own time amounts to robbing it of its being”, Marder (2015, p. 188) writes. Speeding up plant time is therefore not a solution for performing with plants. “So, how can art follow the movement of growth with the least possible interference, heeding the call [of Deleuze and Guattari] ‘Follow the plants!’ . . . ?” (p. 188)

The eighth image (fig.16) of *The Tide . . .*, recorded at 4 pm, shows the shore in backlight. The sun burns the sea behind the tree into a glaring whiteness; the sapling on the left is gone again. A bird flies low across the shore from left to right, followed by a long-tail boat that passes partly hidden behind the rocks. The woman leans her head against the tree.



Figure 16. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 8.

6 pm in Rekdal, partly cloudy, sun on the mountains on the other side of the bay. Now the wind is cold; the tide is coming in, but the water is still low. The rocks covered in seaweed look like lumps of old wet rags abandoned on the beach. Repeating the same image every hour gives very small shifts between the images, and very little time to do something else between the sessions. Walking down to the shore and back up into the house takes some time, as does writing these quick notes after each image. When I look out the window I see a dozen or more images worthy of repeating. I chose a small tree alone on the shore, as a reminder of the tree on the beach in Kan Tiang. Today's images have nearly nothing in common with that work, but the idea of creating a companion piece got me going. If I had more time I would probably try something else, try to recognise what is the special thing to record in this landscape. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 17. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 9, 6PM.

Marder (2015) compares the absolute “here” of the plant with the difficulty for humans “to linger patiently in the ‘here’, without ... fantasizing about something that lies ‘over there’ where we are not.” (p. 189) “What we urgently need”, he notes, is “a comparative analysis of our construction of, and interaction with lived space, and a parallel construction and interaction in the case of plants. How do plants make sense of the places they inhabit?” (p. 190)

The ninth image (fig.18) of *The Tide...*, recorded at 5 pm, shows the sun lower, to the right, whitening the sea; the rocks are black in stark contrast. The water has now receded so far as to leave the shore and the rocks on the left connected, with only a small stream of water between them. The tree and the woman merge in the glare, forming a shared shadow against the light in the almost perforated image; a fade to black, the end.



Figure 18. *The Tide in Kan Tiang*, video still 9.

7 pm in Rekdal, cold wind, evening approaching. It is full day light at this hour up in the north, but the feeling of evening is there. The mountains on the other side of the bay look bright; the shore is in the shadow of the mountain behind me. I have managed to edit some other video works between my visits to the shore. Moving between the images on the screen in front of me and the images I can see through the window, makes for a strange duality. The work I am editing is called *Cami de Cavalls* and recorded two years ago as a tourist on Menorca, while walking on a dusty path in the heat of the Mediterranean Summer, a world as distant from this one as it can be. I wonder where I will be editing this cold cool minimalist view... (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 19. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 10, 7PM.

We can have “a rough idea of what the place of plants (which is also a place for them, interpreted by them) looks like. Even so, we cannot put ourselves in this place, much less perform whatever happens in it”, Marder (2015, p. 191) notes. We could, however, “attempt a certain performative approximation to the phenomenology of the plants themselves”, he adds. “This is where the arts can lead the way”, Marder writes, “For, isn’t attempting the impossible and imagining other worlds the highest vocation of art?” (p. 191-192) He explicitly states: “I put this forth as a challenge to those artists and performers who would dare at the very least to include the spatiality, movement, and perspective of the vegetal in their work.” (p. 192)

8 pm in Rekdal, cold and windy. Wondering whether the sun will come out on the other side of the mountain before I am finished; it might do so only around midnight, and I have decided to finish at ten. If the tide would be visible I could go on until high tide at 11 pm as planned, but as it is, that is rather pointless. Some sunlight to finish with would not hurt, though. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 20. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 11, 8PM.

“The inclusion of the vegetal does not imply a mere representation of plants”, Marder (2015) writes. “As an alternative, we can tease out, aesthetically, the vegetal heritage in us, ... the fleeting sense of our plant-hood.” (p. 192) He invites us to focus on the process of growth.

9 pm in Rekdal, windy as before. There is a picnic by the boathouse with some of the artists and one of the neighbours, a barbecue of whale meat (!), controversial but delicious. I was chatting away with a glass of red wine when I realised it was time to take the next image and hurried to the camera. I cleared away the material from the memory card and hoped that the battery would last. And it did. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 21. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 12, 9PM.

“What would it mean for a performance, or for another artistic practice, to strive like a plant in all directions at once, excessively, and with the utmost spatial or corporeal attention paid to every inch of the place where it unfolds. Where is the border between concentration and scattering here?” Marder (2015, p. 193) asks. “And how can we first throw ourselves into such a performance or creative act, the way a seed is sown without any guarantee that it would germinate? What would need to be set up for this kind of performance to grow, to extend its reach, while remaining rooted in the context wherein it first cropped up?” (p. 193)

10 pm in Rekdal, the last image. The tide is fairly high now, covering most of the rocks and coming further in still. It is cold despite the light and I decide not to make an extra image at 11 pm hoping for the sun. At the moment of writing this it is eleven o’clock, and there are blue clouds all over the sky in the northwest and the north, no direct view of the sun. It would have been useless to wait; enough for now. (Arlander 20.7.2017)



Figure 22. *Grey Day in Rekdal*, video still 13, 10PM.

In working with *The Tide in Kan Tiang* and later creating its companion piece *Grey Day* in Rekdal focus was on working with the tide. It was not the tide, however, but the tree, my unknown vegetal co-performer on that day in the rocky cove near Kan Tiang beach – together with the challenge posed by the current environmental crisis to reinvent our relationship to the environment, as well as the challenge articulated by Marder, described above, to create a performance like a plant – that prompted me to focus on the possibilities of “performing with plants”, and to look for a birch partner on the meadow at the shore in Rekdal. To consider performing with plants from a post-humanist and new-materialist perspective is ever more relevant today; how to perform together with creatures, life forms and phenomena around us, in a manner that would allow us all to join the “ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (Barad, 2007, p. 335).

And Diffraction?

If diffraction as a methodology is understood as a counterpoint to reflection, as mentioned in the beginning, “a tool for thinking about socialnatural practices in a performative rather than representationalist mode” (Barad, 2007, p. 88), we can ask, whether an intertwining of examples, as attempted above, can be understood as diffraction at all. Instead of reflecting on the work, bouncing back and forth the same ideas in a vortex of reflexivity, I tried working with several waves or experiences, juxtaposing and intertwining them. They are not spreading out from the same point, however, but more like threads converging, woven together. If reading diffractively can mean reading texts “through one another” to produce unexpected outcomes (Geerts and van der Tuin, 2016, para 4), as suggested to begin with, we have to ask what is the outcome of this particular entwining? Is it simply an exercise in making a textual collage, or perhaps a simple comparative analysis between the two works inspired by some philosophical remarks?

Combining interpretative descriptions of one finished work with the field notes of making another work could be understood as a form of diffractive reading in itself, a blurring of the boundaries between two strands of experience, separated spatiotemporally and deliberately related thematically and experientially. Adding quotes of theoretical thoughts by Marder only loosely related to either work in between these strands, means creating an extra layer on the level of the text. By doing that I am not suggesting that Marder’s thinking would be entangled with these works in any specific way, nor that these works would be entangled with Marder’s thinking in the manner Barad suggests in her “Diffracting Diffraction” (2014). Rather, they function as an additional layer of color, or several colors, in the mix, another series of stripes in a rag rug, another wave of the tide, that brings the rest of the world on to the shore. The main point remains: is some new or previously neglected understanding generated by the use of this

tool?

By trying to perform with the tide, in accordance with the tide, to experience the tide together with a small tree, and later to recreate the experience of the tide on another shore with another tree, I came to realize it was the tree rather than the tide that was my main partner in performance. Moreover, attempting to create a version of the first performance in very different circumstances, highlighted the specificity of each site and the singularity of each tree. This became even more apparent when literally juxtaposing the works step by step, image by image. Another observation concerns the shifting positions between the viewer of a finished work, and the working notes while making a work – the latter being the perspective one as an artist tends to emphasize, because it is the one usually neglected. The value of looking closely at what is there in the final work, regardless of the performing experience, and of trying to describe it – a perspective often shunned by artists, and reserved for critics or historians – also became evident by this experiment.

What about the core question we started with: could performing with trees be used as a tool to generate experiences of increased understanding of life forms and phenomena unlike us, and help us in joining the “ongoing performance of the world”? Based on these experiences I would say yes, absolutely, and would recommend spending time with a tree as a way to begin to think what that might mean. And diffractive reading as a method? Understood broadly, as in this attempt, it seems to be worth exploring further as an alternative to reflection, as a way of creating connections and opening contact points. By juxtaposing and entwining both related and unrelated materials, perhaps even wider a part than the ones played with in this case, some new understandings almost inevitably emerge. This modest attempt at a diffractive reading or writing generated a subtle shift by intertwining images and experiences of trying to perform with the tide with thoughts on empathy, place, movement and growth related to plants, thus turning attention gently and successively to the trees, our silent partners in performance.

References

- Arlander, A. (2014a). From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape. In A. M. G. R. B. R. Benavente & K. Nardini (Eds.), (pp. 26–34). Artnodes.
- Arlander, A. (2014b). Performing landscape for years. *Performance Research*, 19(3), 27–31.
- Arlander, A. (2015). *The tide at kan tiang beach*. Retrieved from <https://annettearlander.com/2015/12/27/the-tide-at-kantiang-beach/>.
- Arlander, A. (2016). *The tide at kan tiang*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=267501>.
- Arlander, A. (2017a). *Grey day in rekdal*. Retrieved from <https://annettearlander.com/2017/07/20/grey-day-in-rekdal/>.
- Arlander, A. (2017b). *Grey day in rekdal*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=381354>.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. duke university Press.
- Barad, K. (2014). Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *Parallax*, 20(3), 168–187.
- Barad, K., & Kleinman, A. (2012). Intra-actions. *Interview by Adam Kleinman. Mousse*, 34, 76–81.
- Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Burroughs, W. S., & Gysin, B. (1978). *The third mind*. New York: Viking Press.
- Geerts, E., & van der Tuin, I. (2016). Diffraction & reading diffractively. *New materialism almanac*.
- Guattari, F. (2000). The three ecologies (I. Pindar & P. Sutton, Trans.). *London (Orig. pub. 1989)*.
- Marder, M. (2012). The life of plants and the limits of empathy. *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review/Revue canadienne de philosophie*, 51(2), 259–273.
- Marder, M. (2013). *Plant-thinking: A philosophy of vegetal life*. Columbia University Press.
- Marder, M. (2015). The place of plants: Spatiality, movement, growth. *Performance Philosophy*, 1(1), 185–194.