



ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND DRAMA

Softening

- a choreographic exploration with trees

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Trees, Choreography, Dance, Eco Art, Embodiment, Resilience, Reconnect, Ecosomatic

The purpose of this project is to explore how to connect with nature through an embodied work, understood through a choreographic practice. It seeks to investigate what movements and materials can be generated from a choreographic work with trees. This was made through practice-based research, outdoors in nature and in the studio, using fascia-focused training, attentive walking, and explorative work through tactile and kinesthetic senses. Three performances/presentations have been made as part of this empirical work, where dwelling, connection, ecocentrism and embodiment, are essential aspects in the relation to nature and trees. The work has resulted in the development of a new way of moving, and points towards a new movement system influenced by the elasticity of the trees. The title, Softening, is both a result of my project and a call for action as a pathway towards a sustainable world.



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Introduction

A windy day in a small forest by the sea

I stand tightly pressed against a high birch

I put my ear to the trunk

waiting

listening

waiting

feeling

waiting

sensing

the wind pulls irregularly in the treetops

I hear it scratching, creaking, hissing through the tree trunk

The wind picks up, it pulls hard on the tree, and...

the whole trunk

moves a little bit away from my body

soon coming back again

Throughout the tree, the tiny, deep elasticity propagates all the way down to the roots

I feel it throughout my whole body

BACKGROUND

I have a background in physical theatre, which I studied for two years at Larssons Theatre Academy¹. Parallel to this, I started to dedicate myself to dancing and I discovered the beautiful art of improvising and being in flowing contact with another body through contact improvisation². I also studied contemporary dance³ and Balinese dance at the University of Dance in Yogyakarta, Indonesia⁴. Together with colleagues, I founded Embla Dance and Theatre⁵ in 1989, and since then Embla has been my main artistic platform. For more than twenty years I am the artistic leader and choreographer.

In the 90s I started choreographing and dancing outdoors, first in the streets in cities, later in different nature environments. In a dance workshop in Spain, I hugged a tree for some time, and a very different dance solo emerged. A solo that was danced from a deeper layer in me, being more me and at the same time being the tree. Fifteen years later, in an outdoor performance, I danced on three-thousand-year-old rock carvings, and I experienced a strong connection with our ancestors. Barefoot, always barefoot, my feet stood on the rock, where their feet had been walking. Also, different spaces and elements in nature interacted with my movements and had a strong impact on how I performed the choreography. I continued to create performances in nature environments, especially on rocks.

WHY

I get a clear creative movement flow in nature when I stand on a cliff or in a forest. Nature seems to be my creative muse. I have never made it conscious as a choreographic method or immersed myself in how to do it. When I one day, more than two years ago,

¹ Larssons teaterakademi, 1989-91, under the direction of director and actor Sören Larsson.

² The American choreographer Steve Paxton initiated Contact Improvisation (CI) 1972. CI is based on two moving bodies communicating with each other while in physical contact. In this improvised dance form gravity, momentum and a release into the contact point and the floor plays a big role to experience a flow of movement. CI includes falling, rolling, supporting, giving weight to a partner, following a physical point of contact etc. "Contact Improvisation - About," accessed April 9, 2022, <https://contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/about/index.php>.

³ Stockholm University of the Arts at the former School of Dance and Circus, 1989-90.

⁴ Indonesia Institute of the Arts Dance department, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 1994-95.

⁵ www.embladans.se

once again walked past a tree getting a lot of choreographic images and ideas, I decided it was time to investigate this further. Since I, until then, had mostly used nature as a scenography, I now wanted to go beyond that and examine what happened when I listened to or felt different elements in nature with my whole body. I wanted to work in closer inspiration with nature.

Since the 80's I have had a strong environmental commitment. Parallel to the escalating climate crisis, this commitment has been transformed into strong feelings of anger and pain due to the absurd violence that humanity inflicts on nature in various ways. I slowly became angrier. I was thinking about retraining to become an environmental scientist or to become an environmental activist. I took a course in sustainable development⁶ and learned about good examples of possible sustainable ways forward. The good examples gave me hope, although I thought, and still think, tougher times await us in the future.

A few years ago, I discovered the research of the Italian professor of plant neurobiology, Stefano Mancuso^{7,8} and he gave me new perspectives on the world. He writes and talks about the fact that humans have always had a hard time relating to plants, although plants make up 99% of our nature, we, and the animals the rest. Mancuso believes that this is probably because we cannot see a tree, or a plant, move by itself and that the structure of plants is very different from ours.

To reconnect with nature is today a common concept in climate research and resilience thinking, as well as in many other fields, linked to the idea of a sustainable way forward in the climate crisis. To investigate how I, as a dancer and choreographer, could reconnect with nature, I decided to explore what movement materials were created

⁶ Annika Lundqvist, "Hållbar utveckling," accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.uu.se//utbildning/utbildningar/selma/kurser/?kKod=1GV083&typ=1>.

⁷ "Stefano Mancuso, Director of LINV," *LINV - International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology* (blog), accessed April 2, 2022, <http://www.linv.org/about-us/>.

⁸ Stefano Mancuso et al., *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence* (Washington: Island Press, 2015); Stefano Mancuso and Vanessa Di Stefano, *The Revolutionary Genius of Plants: A New Understanding of Plant Intelligence and Behavior*, First Atria books hardcover edition (New York, NY: Atria Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2018).

⁹ *The Roots of Plant Intelligence*, 1286787300, https://www.ted.com/talks/stefano_mancuso_the_roots_of_plant_intelligence.

through choreographic work with trees.

Another main reason for me to do this project was to make an artistic contribution to the ecological crisis through a choreographic exploration and maybe make a change in the way people perceive nature, and one element of the ecosystem, trees. Nature with its biomass and all living things is a prerequisite for human existence. I, and many with me, believe that we need to create a new relationship between humans and the environment.

WHAT

The purpose of this project is to explore how to connect with nature through the human body, understood through a choreographic practice. Furthermore, it seeks to investigate what qualitative movements and material can be generated from a choreographic work with trees.

HOW

Through practice-based choreographic research, outdoors in nature and in the studio, I have made my explorative work. The practices I have used are fascia-focused training, attentive walking, and choreographic explorative work with trees, through tactile and kinaesthetic senses. The practices developed during my process, even new ones emerged, due to the meetings with trees, conversations with other people and the reading of theory within fields such as environmental science, anthropology, choreography etc.

During the first year, the exploration mainly took place outdoors, during lab sessions with trees. I did two outdoor interactive presentations¹⁰ in July and August 2021. During the second year, I immersed myself in the elasticity of the trees and the body, both outdoors and in the studio. My final presentation, an interactive performance installation, took place indoors in February 2022.

¹⁰ I have chosen to use the word presentation for the explorative sharings I did with an audience. I could call them performances, but I want to stress the investigative mode and thus find the word presentation more suitable.

WHERE IN THE WORLD

Art in relation to the environment and ecology has been explored by many artists worldwide. The field which might be called Environmental Art¹¹ or Ecological Art¹² is huge and I have just touched the surface while studying theories and articles and watching a variety of art pieces. When I started this master's program I entered for me, a new world that I have still merely started to discover. There are many concepts, and I will refer to some of them later in this text. I also found several theories and research, which resonate with my project. Some, that I have examined further, have pushed me in a new direction or strengthened me to continue my path.

The limitations of my project

I have been inspired by many of the theories and research I have explored even though I have not used them in my project. I especially want to point out ecosomatics which is an interdisciplinary field combining somatic work¹³ with ecological awareness. During my first fieldwork, I tried some practices from this field, for example, Andrea Olsen's Body and Earth excursions¹⁴. This approach to bodywork did not resonate with me at the time, and I decided to continue with my practice.

I have also studied the work by Anette Arlander¹⁵. She is a researcher, artist and professor in performance and has since 2017 conducted artistic research on the topic of plants and trees. When I first studied some of her research, I felt she had already done what I wanted to do. However, examining her project more closely, I found that she was performing with plants, trees, and landscapes as co-actors. Her works urged me to search deeper for what I wanted to do, and I defined three basic pillars in my project: body, trees, and choreography.

¹¹ "Environmental-Art Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com," accessed August 6, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/environmental-art?q=environmental+art>.

¹² "ResearchGate Link," accessed August 6, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274719395_The_practice_of_ecological_art.

¹³ Here I use it meaning sensing and perceiving through the body.

¹⁴ "Body and Earth," Body and Earth, accessed March 30, 2022, <http://www.body-earth.org/work>.

¹⁵ "Performing with Plants - Att Uppräda/ Samarbeta Med Växter by Anette Arlander," accessed March 9, 2022, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/316550/316551>.

Furthermore, when attending two different plant symposiums¹⁶ I listened to seminars held by people from different indigenous cultures. I am aware of all the knowledge and the relationship these cultures have of and to nature, and the lack of the same in a large portion of the world population, including myself. At the same time, I, as a western city woman, cannot walk the path they have taken. I need to find my way based on who I am and the experiences that have shaped me.

READING GUIDE

This is how I have structured my thesis. First, I will explain my practices and methods in detail. I will also introduce some theoretical concepts. Then I will take you to the fieldwork, the presentations outdoors, and the indoor studio work, which is here described and reflected upon. The third section will describe and discuss the process of creating the final presentation. Finally, I will conclude and wrap up my initial claim.

¹⁶ “The Mind of Plants,” The Mind of Plants, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.themindofplants.com/>; “Being with Plants 2021,” Being with plants 2021, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.beingwithplants2021.org>.

Practical and theoretical exploration

My exploration mainly took place outdoors and during long sessions with trees. In the first section of this chapter, I will describe the methods and practices I have used. Then I will introduce some references and concepts that influenced my work.



TREES

“All trees are plants, but not all plants are trees.”¹⁷ A tree is a perennial plant with an elongated stem or trunk. In everyday life, we often distinguish between a plant and a tree, and I will keep this definition in this text.

I started my project working with different natural elements on a site. During the first fieldwork, I worked with trees, leaves, plants, moss, soil, rocks, and sand. Later I narrowed it down to plants and trees, but it turned out that my explorative work method was best applied to trees. In addition, when the plants during late autumn and early spring were absent and the trees remained, the choice was easy. I decided to focus only on trees, even though they are never separate, always part of a larger ecosystem.

WORKING OUTDOORS AMONG TREES

Take off your shoes and socks

Stand barefoot on the ground or on a rock

Feel how it really feels on the soles of your feet

Start walking gently on the ground

Walk until you feel curious about who or what you are touching

¹⁷ Andrew, “The 11 Biggest Differences Between Trees vs Plants (...Full List),” March 6, 2021, <https://localtreeestimates.com/differences-between-trees-vs-plants/>.

Fieldwork

My explorative work took place outdoors during three different periods¹⁸. Each period consisted of 12-15 field works in different nature-rich places¹⁹. In these places, I chose individual trees belonging to the species of aspens, birches, oaks, chestnuts, beeches, elms, alders, pines, spruces, and lindens. I either worked with each tree once or several times, as has been the case with about ten tree individuals.

A starting practice for each fieldwork has been to:

- warm-up bodily, either indoors or at the site
- attentive walking to the site
- holding a tree for about 10-20 minutes

I documented large parts of my work through video, images, and a logbook. After each fieldwork session, I watched the video material, analysed it, and reflected upon how I should go on in the next session.

Somatic practice

Throughout the whole project, I regularly practised Slings Myofascial Training²⁰, by Art of Motion²¹, a fascia-focused body-minded movement method²². Fascia is the connected tissue that surrounds all organs, and muscles, and permeates the whole body²³²⁴. I used this training as a warming up and as a continuous conditioning of the body, either a guided class online or my own set of fascial slings and movements. The reason for me to choose this training for the project was that I am familiar with fascia-focused somatic training for five years and I assumed this training could strengthen my somatic explorative work. After nearly fifteen years of production of performances and touring, with a constant outer eye present during rehearsals and on stage, I needed to reawaken

¹⁸ September to November 2020, April to June 2021 and August to October 2021.

¹⁹ In total 7 different places; close to Gothenburg, on the west coast and in the northeast part of Skåne.

²⁰ Karin Gurtner, Kiki Vance, and Heidi Savage, *Slings Essentials: A Movement Concept for Somatic Ease and Radiant Vitality*, 2020, p. 53-61.

²¹ "Our Story - Art of Motion," accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.art-of-motion.com/en/about-us>.

²² This method is based on new findings in fascia research and movement science and consists of physical training as well as a mental understanding of fascia.

²³ I here present a very simplified model of the fascia. The research on fascia is a relatively young research, even though, for example, Tom Myers, has worked with it clinically for over 20 years. See page 16 in this thesis for more information.

²⁴ Thomas W. Myers, *Anatomy Trains: Myofascial Meridians for Manual and Movement Therapists*, 3rd ed (Edinburgh: Elsevier, 2014); Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*.

the inward sensing and an exploratory attitude.

K. Gurtner²⁵, the founder and developer of Slings Myofascial Training, has defined 12 qualities connected to fascia, such as glide, fluidity, plasticity, kinaesthesia, multidimensionality, elasticity, and adaptability²⁶. One cannot train the fascia explicitly²⁷, since it is always connected to for example muscles²⁸, but one can train it intentionally by doing exercises that enhance a specific quality. Already at the beginning of the training with this method, I was drawn to the training of the elastic quality. Thereby I had my first encounter with the experience and terminology describing elasticity that later became an important concept in my research with trees. Since it takes a long time and regular training to strengthen and restructure the fascia²⁹, it is likely that this training gave me greater freedom in my body to explore elasticity to the extent that I did during my indoor studio work, one year later. I am aware that it is common in somatic works to use body-minded training methods. However, it is interesting to me to note the connection with what the anthropologists Benjamin Cooke, Simon West, and Wiebren J. Boonstra are discussing in their article “Dwelling in the biosphere: exploring an embodied human–environment connection in resilience thinking”³⁰; the importance of seeking a body-minded connection to the environment. This article has been of importance in my project, and I will come back to it later when discussing the dwelling concept.

Attentive walking

Training presence and opening the senses was a way for me to slow down and prepare myself for the somatic work in nature. Inspired by my practice of mindfulness and meditation which I’ve done for about 15 years, I decided to do awareness training while walking to the site where I was going to work. During the walk, I practised attentive awareness of my body’s movements and sensations as well as my mental and emotional

²⁵ “Karin Gurtner - Art of Motion,” accessed April 2, 2022, <https://www.art-of-motion.com/en/about-us/team/karin-gurtner>.

²⁶ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*, p. 65-71.

²⁷ Thomas W. Myers, *Anatomy Trains: Myofascial Meridians for Manual and Movement Therapists*, 3rd ed (Edinburgh: Elsevier, 2014), p. 4.

²⁸ Hence the term Myofascial, myo = muscle.

²⁹ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*.

³⁰ Benjamin Cooke, Simon West, and Wiebren J. Boonstra, “Dwelling in the Biosphere: Exploring an Embodied Human–Environment Connection in Resilience Thinking,” *Sustainability Science* 11, no. 5 (September 2016): 831–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-016-0367-3>.

state. This was alternated with practising attentive awareness of my surroundings through the senses of sight, hearing, and smell. I sometimes used an app³¹³² with a variety of awareness training meditations, such as focusing on the movements in my body alternating with simply being present in the body. Walking became an essential part of my practice and was later also a part of all three performances I did.

Choreographic practice with trees

To have bodily contact with trees has been essential throughout my process. Looking back on the three periods of fieldwork, I can see a theme of three different practices I have used in each period of fieldwork.

Period 1. Touch.

For example, holding a hand on a tree, sitting against a tree, lying on a tree, having as much physical contact as possible with a tree, and sensing the bark through touch, pressure, or glide.

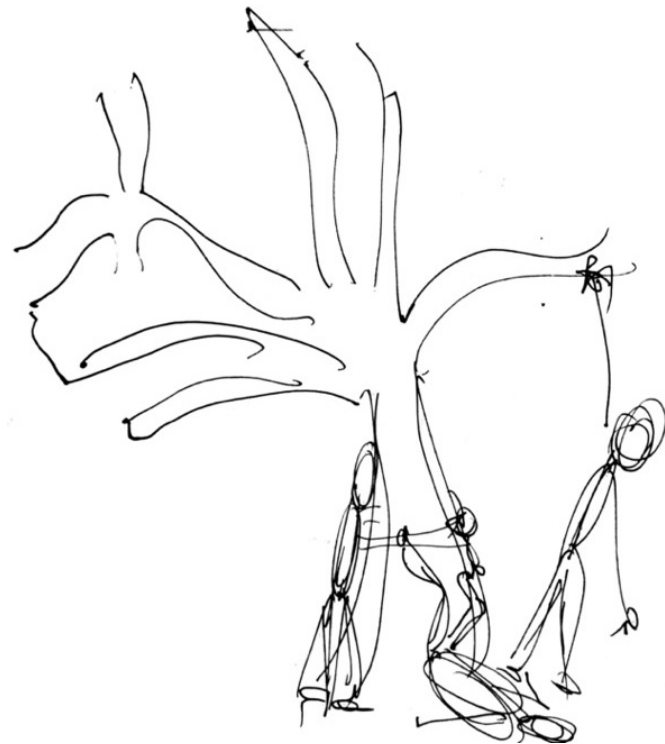
Period 2. Contact improvisation with trees.

For example, contact point rolling, leaning out from, giving weight into.

Period 3. Elasticity.

For example, rocking and swinging.

I continued to work with touch throughout all periods, accumulating experiences. Elasticity became a new practice during the third period. At the end of that period, I recognized the work with elasticity as also being a developed method of doing contact improvisation with trees. I will discuss each of these methods



³¹ Developed by Richard Davidson, Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Founder and Director of the Center for Healthy Minds. The app uses neuroscientific research as a base.

³² “Healthy Minds Innovations | Science-Based Program & App for a Healthier Mind,” Healthy Minds Innovations, accessed April 2, 2022, <https://hminnovations.org/>.

in depth further on in the text.

The tactile and kinesthetic senses

The two main senses that I worked with are tactile and kinaesthetic senses. Through the Slings Myofascial Training, I gained embodied knowledge about the connection between these senses and the fascia. This experience supported my decision to continue the training to deepen the sensitizing work. The practical experience of becoming more buoyant, dynamically stabilized, and present through the training also supported this decision.

The tactile and kinaesthetic senses are both connected to the sense of touch. The tactile mind is informed by external touch. The skin consists of two layers, where the outer is the contact outwards, and the inner is the contact inwards³³. The fascia has contact with the inner skin layer, which means that according to integrative manual therapists Tom Myers³⁴ and K. Gurtner, the outer touch also informs the body through the fascia. The kinaesthetic sense enables us to sense our body movements and is informed through our fascia³⁵. The kinaesthetic sense can be divided into two categories: proprioception and interoception³⁶. Proprioception is the ability to coordinate and sense, consciously and unconsciously, our movements and positions. Interoception is the ability to sense the sensations consciously or unconsciously in our body and to respond to what we feel. For example, interoception enables us to feel alive and whole as human beings.

Movement improvisation

I used improvisation as a practice to explore the sensing experience and to generate movement material. I continued with this method together with other methods. During the second period, I added the practice of dancing in contact with the tree, using contact improvisation. During the third fieldwork period, I mainly worked with the concept of elasticity. Later, the format of improvising also became the format I chose to use for the dances in the performances I did.

³³ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, p.44-45.

³⁴ "Tom Myers - Author of Anatomy Trains," Anatomy Trains, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://www.anatomytrains.com/about-us/certified-teachers/tom-myers/>.

³⁵ Myers, *Anatomy Trains*, p.213; Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*, p 251.

³⁶ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*, p. 251-261.

Documentation

I started to film and take photos to document my process as well as to choose movement material from the filmed improvisations. Already during my first fieldwork period, I noticed that I had an interest in trying to capture elements and events in nature. Filming nature and specifically trees became a part of my investigative work and I continued to do so during all the periods of my outdoor explorative work. I will discuss this process further in the chapter of the final presentation.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Some concepts associated with environmental work within different disciplines and fields have had great importance for my artistic exploration and therefore I am introducing them here.

Resilience thinking and reconnection

Resilience thinking is built upon the understanding of strong connections between humans and the ecosystems of our world. It is also an important concept within sustainability work regarding the climate crisis. Stockholm Resilience Centre, an international research centre on resilience and sustainability science³⁷, point out that a huge problem in this work is that humans have, for the last hundred years or so, mentally disconnected from nature. Therefore, they have long argued for the importance to reconnect to nature, to truly start caring for the very fundament of our existence³⁸.

Dwelling

In my project, it was important to explore the concept of reconnecting to nature both physically and sensory. The investigation was not built on facts about for example the inner processes of the tree because I wanted to do the investigation from a practical

³⁷ "Stockholm Resilience Centre - Stockholm Resilience Centre," accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/>.

³⁸ "What Is Resilience?" accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2015-02-19-what-is-resilience.html>; "Resilience Thinking," accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-videos/2018-09-17-resilience-thinking.html>; "Vad är resiliens? | Vad är resiliens?" accessed April 8, 2022, <https://whatisresilience.org/sv/start-se/>.

point of view and not through theoretical knowledge. However, I have pondered and read a lot about the concept to support my choices in the process. I was very much inspired by the article " Dwelling in the biosphere: exploring an embodied human–environment connection in resilience thinking"³⁹ by the anthropologists Benjamin Cooke, Simon West & Wiebren J. Boonstra. In the article the authors explore how the human-environment connection can be framed as an embodied relationship, arguing that " humans are not just mentally but also materially and physically immersed in their immediate environments."⁴⁰ They support the thought that connection needs to be established not only through the mind but also through the body.

Cooke, West and Boonstra propose the anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of dwelling to create an embodied relationship with nature. Dwelling can be explained by an example that I have been told in a conversation with Anthropologist Sten Hagberg⁴¹; If you are out in a forest picking mushrooms you will learn to know the forest through your mushroom picking. Through your bodily and practical experience of the forest, one can say you are dwelling in the forest. The opposite is that you know the forest by your theoretical knowledge of which mushrooms grow in that specific forest, but you are never there to pick them. By being in the forest you will create bodily memories and experiences of being there.

Cooke, West and Boonstra talk about dwelling as a physical interaction between humans and the environment. They argue that caring for our environment needs to come from involvement and commitment, which might be evoked through dwelling. They not only want to introduce the importance of the physical perspective but also state that contact is created "through the ongoing interactivity of mind, body and environment through time". The concept of time is important since it points out an ongoing contact which is created by the interaction.

This reasoning responds to and highlights the very core of my project. These thoughts have supported my exploratory work and pushed it in the direction of continuing to be outdoors with trees, to continue to investigate and shape an embodied relationship with the trees.

³⁹ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, "Dwelling in the Biosphere."

⁴⁰ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, p 4.

⁴¹ Hagberg, Sten; professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Uppsala. Interview 2020-10-21.

Anthropomorphism

Questions that have recurred during the process of creating a relationship with trees are; What does such a relationship look like? How does it feel? I think it's just like with a new man-man acquaintance, where it takes a while to see what that relationship is about. But the difference is that I have no previous experience to lean on. I will do it with another existence, whose whole life and structure are so different.

The researcher in plant ecology, Jacques Tassin, talks in his book "Tänk som ett träd"^{42,43} about the need to relate to these differences, and to start seeing the tree as it is, not what we want it to be. He argues that we will only mirror ourselves if we keep looking for the similarity between trees and humans.

In texts as well as films and in symposiums about plants I have come across the concept of humanizing, or so-called anthropomorphizing⁴⁴. Which, according to Cambridge Dictionary means "to show or treat an animal, god, or object as if it is human in appearance, character, or behaviours". Explanations to why we tend to humanize are many, for example, to explain the unfamiliar or to make something more familiar. And we do it with the only model we know, ourselves⁴⁵.

"Most scholars since the time of the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) have agreed that the tendency to anthropomorphize hinders the understanding of the world, but it is deep-seated and persistent."⁴⁶

I had, especially in the beginning, a clear tendency to look for similarities or human characters, between me and trees, which I interpret as anthropomorphism. In different conversations as well as in the book "Tänk som ett träd" I was reminded of that we are not like trees. This has led me to ponder where I stand in this context: to search for similarities between me and trees, or a relationship built upon differences. I have concluded that if I continue to humanize, I will use human characteristics for the new relationship and thereby continue to place myself as a human in the centre of the world.

⁴² This book is not published in english. My translation of the title is: Thinking like a tree.

⁴³ Jacques Tassin, *Tänk som ett träd*. (Lund: Bakhåll, 2020), p 31-32, 113-114.

⁴⁴ "Anthropomorphize," accessed April 3, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropomorphize>.

⁴⁵ "Anthropomorphism | Religion | Britannica," accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anthropomorphism>.

⁴⁶ "Anthropomorphism | Religion | Britannica."

I do not say that it is an easy path to try to avoid humanizing and my ambition has not been to be able to fully follow this decision, but I have threaded this path and I wanted to give it an honest try. I think that the following quotation written by the biologist and artist Dawn Sanders et al formulates what I am looking for, and thus has supported my reflections.

“ ...the imperative is for humans to engage conceptually and responsibly with nonhuman organisms possessing entirely different physiologies and behaviours. In our engagement with such difference, we mustn't be diverted into subjecting plants to human registers and ‘terms of resemblance’, (Houle, 2011) but rather to engage with their ‘plantness’ (Darley, 1990)⁴⁷⁴⁸ ...”⁴⁹

Ecocentrism

By attributing human characteristics to the tree, I, as I said before in the text, reflect upon if I at the same time maintain a human-centred approach. In the book "Granskogsfolk"⁵⁰⁵¹, by historian of religion, David Thurfjell, he discusses the concept of anthropocentrism⁵² in relation to several in-depth interviews he has conducted. From the interviews, it became clear to Thurfjell that the interviewed persons valued the most what they get out of nature, such as comfort or a spiritual experience. This highlights the problem regarding humanity acting as the centre and on top of the rest of the living world. Always put in the foreground one's own needs and what you can benefit from nature.

⁴⁷ W. Marshall Darley, "The Essence of 'Plantness,'" *The American Biology Teacher* 52, no. 6 (1990): 354–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4449132>.

⁴⁸ In his article, "The essence of 'plantness'", Botanist W. M. Darley points to differences between plants and animals, to highlight precisely what is typical of plants. For example, how they grow, how they respond to their surroundings, their nutritional intake, mobility and more. The fundamental difference between plants and animals, says Darley, is their way of relating to nutrition. Plants are autotrophs, which means that they produce their own nutrition by using carbon from the atmosphere, the sun's energy together with minerals, and usually also water. Animals are heterotrophs, which in short means that they cannot create their own nutrition, but depend on others to create it.

⁴⁹ Dawn Sanders, Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir, and Mark Wilson, "Beyond Plant Blindness: Seeing the Importance of Plants for a Sustainable World," 2020, <https://gup-server.ub.gu.se/publication/301958>, p 5.

⁵⁰ This book is not published in english. My translation of the title is: Spruce forest people.

⁵¹ David Thurfjell, *Granskogsfolk: Hur Naturen Blev Svenskarnas Religion* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2020).

⁵² A belief in humans and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe "Anthropocentrism," accessed April 3, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anthropocentrism>.

According to Mancuso, Thurfjell and Ingold, another example of a problematic anthropocentric approach is to see nature as a tranquil background, like a scenography. This reflects my former approach, which I strive to go beyond in this project.

It is interesting to me that Thurfjell discusses whether an anthropocentric approach would preclude an environmental commitment. He concludes that this might not necessarily be the case, since you might want to protect something that has value for you. Still, he argues that humanity would benefit from looking upon nature with a greater ecocentric⁵³ perspective. This argument is also supported by for example forest biologist Sebastian Kirppu⁵⁴ and forester Håkan Strotz⁵⁵, and of course by many more.

Concluding comments on theoretical concepts

A question I have pondered is how an ecocentric approach can be incorporated into my artistic exploration. While creating the three presentations I have tried to apply these thoughts and make them part of my artistic choices. For example, I wanted the movement of the trees to be at the forefront of my final presentation to create a change of who is at the centre of attention. This does not mean that the human body is not important, it is just an attempt to shift the perspective and balance of the prevailing hierarchy between humans and nature.

During the explorative work, I have thought a lot about what it means to build a relationship with trees, and how I can do it without placing myself in the centre. I reflect on how the choice of language and words consolidate norms and hierarchies and thereby influence the power balance. Therefore, I have tried to remove terminology that humanizes or maintains the unequal relationship. Probably I have not succeeded completely, since as with norms, it is difficult to recognize them when you are a part of them.

The anthropologists Cooke et al emphasize in their article that the physical perspective through the concept of dwelling is a prerequisite for bridging the disconnection human-environment. They also argue that it is not possible to separate knowledge from

⁵³ Here I choose to use the word “ecocentric” meaning the opposite of anthropocentrism.

⁵⁴ Kirppu, Sebastian. Forest biologist. Interview 2021-10-21.

⁵⁵ Strotz, Håkan; forester, Ödeshög. Interview 2021-11-10.

physical involvement. My perception is that they, in this article, want to shift the balance in the general conversation where it most often is the change of mindset which is discussed. Therefore, they present the thought that ongoing interaction between body, mind and the environment is a prerequisite for reconnection. This thought can be applied to my whole process. Even though I have had a strong focus on the somatic work, references and conversations have been important to develop my reflections on my project and support the artistic choices I have taken.



Empirical work and method development

In this chapter, I give examples and reflect upon the explorative work outdoors and indoors and new practices and methods that have developed. The work outdoors includes three periods of fieldwork and two presentations. Towards the end of the chapter, the concept of elasticity is introduced.

FIELD WORK OUTDOORS AMONG TREES

Excerpt from logbook:

It is the end of September 2020, and I am in the summer house outside Ljungskile to work for 10 days. I'm in my first period of fieldwork and look forward to many sunny days, even though somewhat cold. In the morning, I start by taking a fascia class online with Art of Motion. Then I get dressed in many layers of clothes and pack the backpack with my mobile phone, a camera tripod, a battery charger, a notebook, a pen, water, and a banana. I go to the edge of a forest close to the sea. On my way, I do a walking attention exercise. Once there, I choose a pine and make as much physical contact as possible with the tree. I stand still, and let sensations, thoughts and feelings come and go. When the alarm on the timer goes on ten minutes later, I move from the tree and start moving based on inner images and impulses. The improvisation lasts as long as I am inspired. The day continues and in the same way, I try out some alders, two different rocks, wet sand on the shore, reeds, and pine needles. Every time starting the session with physical contact with the element for 10 -15 minutes before I go into a movement improvisation.

Try-outs

In retrospect, I notice that during all my fieldwork periods I consistently used the method described above. However, I also tried some different methods and approaches as well as adding new ones. Here follows some of my explorations and tryouts with different methods I explored during my first fieldwork period.

I spent some time exploring the difference between when I danced something I had seen or heard and something I had physically sensed. For me, it was a big difference in how much inspiration I got from the different senses and how anchored this inspiration then was in my body. I decided to move on with the touching sense as the main source of generating movements and connecting to trees. Later I pondered over the sense of sight and concluded that sight has had a great impact on my work, but I have not used it as the dominant source for generating movements.

Another exploration I did was to try to be in close contact with an element for different lengths of time to see how it affected the subsequent improvisation. My conclusion was that duration matters. The longer I was in close contact each session, the more I deepened the work. Gradually in my project, the time I spent with trees in total began to

accumulate in my body. Still, regular, and durational physical contact with trees provided a constant and necessary deepening of the embodiment and the relation to trees. It is an ongoing interactivity, that I will always be ready to redefine. As Cooke, West and Boonstra state; “The relationship between the people and tree is not static or defined by a particular point in time.”⁵⁶

In search of contact

Excerpt from the logbook in October 2020:

I felt so desolate among the big trees. I was so alone. They were so silent. They were so together. I sought contact but did not get it. There is a frustration with nature as well, it is in a way quite dumb. It does not answer me. How do I get in touch? I knocked for several days in a row. Patience. Time. And... I got some kind of contact. It was probably myself I got in touch with. I need to find another way to build a relationship with trees.

Breath

One day on my way home from fieldwork, I stopped in front of a tree, watched it for a long time and allowed my thoughts to wander. Two words started to spin in my head and stayed for the rest of the walk.

Breathing oxygen breathing

breathing oxygen oxygen

breathing

breathing ... oxygen

breathing

breathing

I wrote in my logbook;

There is something about breathing!

There is SOMETHING about breathing!

There IS something about breathing!

⁵⁶ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, “Dwelling in the Biosphere.”, p 8.

Yes, of course, it is! They produce oxygen, which I need to be able to breathe. On that day I gained a body-minded experience and insight into my dependence on the leaves and trees for my existence. A mental knowledge that connected with my whole body and felt meaningful in my endeavour for an embodied connection with trees.

The first hint of twitching

...the old birch by the sea

The deep sharp grooves of the bark enter my body

support and give curves in other parts of the body.

The cracks

and

the irregular bark press against different parts of the body.

I breathe and soften into the trunk.

From the softening

a movement driven by breathing begins.

The movement grows slowly,

waves back and forth and spreads throughout the body.



This event was preceded by several similar events on different cliffs. The weight that came from my body lying on the rock made it easier to let the tissue soften and to sense the shapes of the rock directly into my body. This gave me the idea to lie on a crooked old birch trunk. The movement phrase that I improvised after lying on the old birch, formed the basis for a short dance that I included in all three presentations I performed. At the time of writing this text, I note that it is the movements from the tangible physical contact that transfers directly into my body that are interesting to me. When I later went into the studio and investigated various physicalities generated from my fieldwork, the contact with the bark was the starting point for what came to be called twitching.

Contact improvisation with trees

Spring came early this year, and I went outdoors already in the middle of April to start my second fieldwork period. I ended my first fieldwork period in November 2020 with a sense of not having accessed what I intuitively was looking for. I noticed that the improvisations became more and more similar to each other and that I did not get into the depths of my body, movements or contact with trees. Therefore, I started doing contact improvisation with trees, to try another intimate physical engagement, as stressed in the anthropological article "Dwelling in the Biosphere"⁵⁷. I thought this practice might lead me further on in my investigation. For me, contact improvisation is a way to give attention to and connect with another body at the same time being attentive to my own body and its impulses. In this duo practice, it is also included to dance solo, to strengthen the contact with your senses and body. Through the tactile and kinaesthetic senses, contact improvisation explores an inward awareness at the same time as you respond to another body, during a flowing



⁵⁷ Cooke, West, and Boonstra.

interchange of weight and momentum.

Doing contact improvisation with trees, I was mostly out on my own, but a couple of times I invited guests. For the rest of my fieldwork, I continued to occasionally bring guests⁵⁸, who participated physically in this practice and also were observers, videographers, and conversation partners.



...contact improvisation with the pine in the Botanical Garden...

I lean against the tree,
softening the tissues at the contact point between my body and the tree,
sensing the ground through my feet.

My awareness goes forth and back between my own body and the tree.

Slowly starting to change the point of contact with other body parts,

⁵⁸ Guests: Rachel Tess, Marisa Ponce de Leon, Eirini Konstantinou, Anna Emilsson, Annkatrin Meyerson. Conversations with them have been written down or recorded.

after a while getting a flow in the rolling.

Playing with how much weight I give to the tree by slowly changing how much I lean into the point of contact.

Momentum gives energy

to my travelling to different branches of the tree.

I slow down and rest in stillness.

While exploring the choreographic material generated from doing contact improvisation with trees, I started to discern gestures and movements expressing a psychological relationship drama. This drama would probably be interpreted as me dealing with different feelings in relation to a couple of specific trees. To use this as a choreographic material would have put me, the human, in the centre of attention. In my strive, for a more ecocentric approach to nature, I thus wanted to go on and investigate how I could produce choreographic material trying to place trees in the foreground. Therefore, I did not go on using contact improvisation.

Moving and being moved

I went to visit my artistic and second supervisor, the choreographer Rachel Tess, at her place, Milvus Artistic Research Center⁵⁹ (MARC) in Knislinge, northwest of Skåne. This place is close to Wanås Sculpture Park, where I got the possibility to do some fieldwork.

Inspired by my work with contact improvisation, I started moving and shaking trees. One of the problems with a choreographic exploration with trees was for me that I couldn't experience the inner movement of the tree. The tree appears very still and passive, even though it moves and expands continuously as reflected by Sanders et al⁶⁰. But through my external influence, or the wind, I can experience its movements, complex rhythms, and tempo.

One day I took Rachel out to hold a tree and then dance. After a while, she started observing me dancing while I did contact improvisation with a tree. After a while I

⁵⁹ <http://www.milvusart.se>

⁶⁰ Sanders, Snæbjörnsdóttir, and Wilson, "Beyond Plant Blindness."

started shaking another tree and then Rachel asked me; What if you let the movements go back to your body? Who is now moving who? Who is, in the end, choreographing who?

The first hint of staying

During the second period of fieldwork, I also explored the touching approach to trees. I started noticing that the time that I had already spent with trees had begun to accumulate in my body and something was slowly changing.

On one occasion when Rachel and I spent time together in the park, Rachel asked me why I was doing shapes suddenly while improvising. When reflecting upon the question I became aware that I did the shapes when I was tired or lost inspiration. Onwards, when I noticed that I started to make shapes, I tried to make other choices, for example, to be still, rest in the breath or just continue and see what happened to the movement. I slowly became aware that the shapes were also a way for me to break up phrases and abandon a movement idea. I continued to work on staying with a movement or movement idea during the rest of my fieldwork and later in the studio.

... the thick oak on the top of the allotment garden

15 min in close bodily contact with the tree: *Felt the trunk with a relaxed hand. Breathed and released into the trunk with my body. Needed to change positions sometimes. Heard the knirrk and the buzzing that comes with the wind. Melted into the stability of the trunk.*

15 min dance improvisation: *Different rotational movements and rhythms. With small movements, the joints open. Finally finding openness from feet to head. Feeling an overall connection inside, at some moments. Going back to no movements when I get bored of myself.*



Rachel Tess and I in Wanås Sculpture Park

Elasticity

At the beginning of May 2021, I had a crucial experience in my project. On a windy day, I stood holding a birch. The wind pulled the treetop hard. Suddenly the tree trunk moved a little bit away from me and then hit me back. This was a new experience, I felt the inner powerful and thick elasticity of this stable, big, and hard tree. The movement transferred right into my body and changed me as a person. In the next few months, this breathtaking sensation urged me to stand holding trees as soon as it was windy. And it made me start rocking the trees on days when it was not so windy.

...rocking with the thin oaks in the Botanical Garden

I am still and sense the rocking in different parts of my body.

I lean out, holding a branch with my hand.

Through small weight changes, I explore how the rocking travels in my body. Ending in the shoulder blade? Or go all the way through my arm to the feet?

I sense how small shifts of opening or closing in the body can change where in my body the rocking motion is taking place.

I play with influencing the rhythm, pace, and size of the rocking and thereby what comes back to me.

I try aspens, beeches, various oaks, birches, and pines. I discovered that different tree individuals have different kinds of elasticity, different rhythms, and swing in different ways. This was interesting to experience physically and at the same time, it defined my own body and gave me tools to explore elasticity in different ways. I played with the concept of elasticity by letting the rocking travel forth and back between me and the tree. Not to perform a tree but to examine how it felt in my body, and to make an embodied work.

My rocking of the tree propagates elastic movements all the way to the "fingertips" of the branches. A small small movement of the trunk gives great resonance in a thin branch at the far end. I noticed that the tree is an integrated whole. Which surprisingly, to me, does not give rise to a regular rhythm in the movements, rather the movements in the branches and leaves are irregular in a strangely regular way. And resonates in my body when I immediately afterwards dance the memory of my experiences. Elasticity, which I had met already in the fascia-focused training, now became a new practice to approach trees. I went deeper into this physicality in my further work indoors in the studio.

Concluding comment on fieldwork outdoors

I finally landed in my project, in the place where I found a physical tangible contact point with trees, where movements were transferred from the tree into my body. The trees changed the way I performed and related to elasticity in my body, and I sensed that a method was beginning to crystallize. Later I depicted this practice as also being a developed form of contact improvisation with trees.

By defining the concept of ecocentrism as moving the centre of attention to the trees, I can say that my fieldwork has had an ecocentric approach. That is quite evident since I had assigned myself to reach out to the trees. Later, in my work indoors, the trees had to come to me, through my bodily memory.

EXPLORATIVE PRESENTATIONS WITH TREES

With a starting point in the explorative work, I was commissioned by the Municipality of Tjörn, to do two explorative performances during the summer of 2021. This allowed me to explore my choreographic material and ideas and share it with an audience. From the perspective of my project I have, as said before, chosen to call these performances presentations.

While creating these presentations, I explored how I could translate my own sensory experience and dwelling among trees into an artistic work, to create a sensory-based experience for the audience. I was also interested in the questions; How can I give attention to trees? How can I make the audience part of the choreography?

Exploration in Tomteskogen⁶¹

I read choreographer Mette Ingvarsten's dissertation from 2016⁶², where she explores how to make performances where nature is choreographed. While making a choreography for humans and nature Ingvarsten reflects on the possibility to reconsider the concept of human beings being in the centre of attention, activity, and agency. Completely in line with my thoughts on an ecocentric approach, which I have discussed earlier. Ingvarsten's work and reflections made me ponder the hierarchy between humans and trees. I explored and dwelled in the forest through the eyes of these thoughts and let them affect my choices of how and where to place and organize bodies and trees in the piece.

In the making of the presentation, I paid attention to the trees and also offered the audience an opportunity to get close. To feel the bark, lean towards the trees, look very closely at the roots, or feel the moss in their hands at the same time as an experience of dance. By using picture frames, I invited the audience to examine what they wanted to frame, and what they then saw within the frame if they looked close or far away. And depending on where they stood and looked at the "painting". I ended the presentation

⁶¹ A forest near Sibräcka, Tjörn.

⁶² Mette Ingvarsten, "EXPANDED CHOREOGRAPHY: Shifting the Agency of Movement in The Artificial Nature Project and 69 Positions." (PhD diss., University of Lund, 2016).

with both the dancers and the audience moving in a joint choreography. Everyone got to take a few different scores and perform them wherever they wanted. An example of a score:

Grab a branch carefully and pull it down

Let go and watch the dance it's creating

Let the movement inspire you to dance or move.

One of the instructions was “to sit and watch the movements that happened around you”, to also experience being a part of the choreography.

During this period I explored, redefined and expanded on what choreography is for me. For example, I had a stubborn thought that I wanted to make the audience part of the choreography. I thought of the concept of resilience thinking, which I discussed earlier, where it is so obvious that humans⁶³ are a part of nature, even though we have created a division and tried to place ourselves apart. We are part of the forest ecosystem, and the audience should therefore be part of the show. As the project included and explored an open border between me and a tree individual, I wanted to break the border between the stage and the audience. Breaking the usual line between the audience and the stage is relatively easy in a forest, as the forest does not have such clear boundaries. I, therefore, worked with parts of the dance so it would not matter from which direction you saw it. In retrospect, I read parts of Ingvarsten's dissertation where she describes that the shift from that in theatre so commonly used frontal viewing to adjacent viewing also makes a shift from the sense of vision to activating sensory perception. Through Ingvarsten, I became aware of what I had done and used it as a conscious choreographic tool in my final presentation.

I was inspired by the book “Konsten att gå”⁶⁴ by the professor in dramatic performance Cecilia Lagerström, where she examines walking and how it can provide new perspectives and connections to the environment and yourself. In addition to the book, the regular walkings I did while doing fieldwork, made me decide to do a walking interactive performance. Thus making the audience part of the whole choreography as

⁶³ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, “Dwelling in the Biosphere.”

⁶⁴ Cecilia Lagerström, *Konsten att gå övningar i uppmärksamt gående*. (Halmstad: Gidlunds förlag, 2019).

well as walking their own pathway, giving space for interaction with the environment and some space for one's timing and pace.

The following story tells the reason I decided to take the audience away from the wide footpath, even though I knew they would be just over 30 people, who also had to keep some distance due to the pandemic:

I spent several days in Tomteskogen before the dancers and the musician came to rehearse and perform. As the bike path goes through the forest, a lot of people pass there. I stood a few meters from the path, in an open place with tall pines, trying to "take in" the site. No one who passed looked in my direction. Most people looked down at their mobile phones or had a strong focus forward in both their gaze and steps. The cyclists passed by extremely fast, which meant that it did not seem safe to stand on the path. I also asked a small number of people about where they usually walked when being in the forest. Most of them answered that they mainly walked along this path. After a few days, I was fully convinced that I needed to take the audience away from this path. I choreographed their pathway and took the audience into the midst of the forest, with fallen trees and no trails. People now needed to be attentive in order not to stumble which I noticed affected their presence. For me, being present means an opportunity to focus on the environment.

For the dance parts performed by three dancers, including me, I brought in some movement material from my exploration. For example, breathing, shaking, touching, falling, and some specific movements. At the time of the first two presentations, I had merely started discovering elasticity, which is the reason why this physicality was not part of these presentations. I used sequences from contact improvisation, although careful to keep the evident relational gestures away.

Description of part of the presentation in Tomteskogen

You gather on the parking lot, then walk together to the edge of the forest, where you turn onto the wide paved path. A dancer meets up in silence and makes a sign to follow her. After a while, you see another dancer moving slowly high up in a tree. Further on, a dancer is lying on the ground near the path and a dark heartbeat-like sound begins to play. The dancer's breathing intensifies and slowly creates an increasing movement in the chest which spreads out to the outermost parts of her body. The intensity of the breathing increases and decreases and leads the slow movement when transporting her body along the ground. She ends up in a curled-up

position close to a tree.

You go on and turn off the path to enter a room of pine trunks. Two dancers, in a squatting position, at the same time holding the tree trunk, slowly start rocking from side to side. They lean into and roll along the trunk. They start running, falling... At the end of this sequence, you are invited to put your hand on a trunk, feel the bark, and stand for a while before continuing.



After a bit of walking and experiencing more dance, you come to a room where frames of different sizes are hanging in the trees. A dancer dances her interpretation of what she sees inside the frame. Then she takes down the frame, comes up to you and asks you to frame something new for her to dance.



Afterwards, an acquaintance of the organizer stayed, and started to talk to me about his experience. The discussion eventually came to encompass and reflect upon a variety of environmental issues. I would wish for more of these meetings with the audience. Where art becomes the starting point for an invite to conversations. It is likely that time was a component in creating a condition for this conversation. I also think about two parameters B. Laidlaw and T. Bier write in their article⁶⁵ to reconnect to nature: willingness and openness. I ponder this and wonder if I can find ways to make my art more often evoke these qualities, willingness and openness, and thus create conditions for in-depth conversations regarding for example environmental issues. To connect a physical experience of dance with mental reflections and knowledge, in relation to the environment.

⁶⁵ Brittany Laidlaw and Tanja Beer, "Dancing to (Re)Connect: Somatic Dance Experiences as a Medium of Connection with the More-than-Human," n.d., 28.

Presentation at Pilane

Later that summer the second presentation, a site-specific interactive walking performance at Pilane Sculpture Park, took place. It was the same team performing as in Tomteskogen, with the addition of yet another musician. The 24th of August was a sunny late summer day, and the park was crowded with people.

For this presentation, I mainly explored the concept of framing nature as art, and I developed the joint choreography concept from the last time in Tomteskogen. This time I made a whole score which was handed out in three different versions to the audience. Which created three different choreographies in the space.



SHARING METHODS THROUGH A WORKSHOP

I was commissioned by the municipality of Tjörn to hold a dance workshop among and with trees. This was my first opportunity to define and formulate what practices I developed during my fieldwork.

On a sunny quiet day in August, the five workshop participants came walking across the field from the parking lot. I met them on the small gravel road and told them that we should walk the final way to the workshop place keeping our attention on how our feet were feeling against the ground and what we were seeing, hearing, and smelling. My aim was that this would create a presence inwardly into the body and open the senses to the environment. Suddenly and from nowhere some cyclists showed up and asked for the way to somewhere. A man in a car came driving, parked, and stepped out from the car with his dog. The dog started barking. The man curiously asked what we were doing and joined us for a while. Our whole walk was then lined up with people passing by. I reminded myself that this is what presence and improvisation training is about; the ability to balance between having a will and direction towards something, while still being open to what happens at the moment and choosing how to respond. This is what I try to work with when I am with the trees. I took this precious experience with me for inclusion in my ongoing project.

Some examples of the exercises I did with the participants:

- Warming up focusing on the fascia.
- Walk around and pay attention to the site. See, listen, smell, feel your skin against the air, feel your feet against the ground. Make a movement or shape from something you see or feel.
- Choose a tree and explore it with your hands and gradually with your whole body. Feel it through your tactile sense. Then move based on the bodily experience.
- Do contact improvisation with the tree. Do a rolling-contact-point while leaning into and out from the tree.
- Lift a finger and pinpoint a tip of a branch or a leaf. Follow a line slowly downwards. If you reach a dead end, decide how to get to a new line. Continue drawing your tree with your finger in the air all the way down to the roots. Now, make a new drawing with another body part.
- Hold a leaf or needles in your hands, close your eyes and for about three to five minutes carefully explore the texture, shape and other qualities that emerge. Move from the memory of the

experience, it can be a movement or a longer sequence. When you have finished your phrase, take a new leaf, do the same, and continue to change at your own pace.

After the participants explored a tree, one person reflected that she experienced the tree as being very sad. After a while, she says that maybe it was her own feelings that she projected on the tree. It was such a clear insight and very relevant to my project since it touches upon the concept of humanizing.

INDOORS IN STUDIO

By placing the choreographic material in different spatial contexts, I have been able to work with it from different perspectives and thereby deepen my process. When I took my work in-house there were no trees to dance with. I had to focus on my body and its memories from the choreographic work with trees. Thereby my movement exploration outdoors was physically clarified. It was there and then I really landed in my own body and thus also in the relationship to the trees.

Practice

In November 2021 I went into the studio. Through my body's memory of the choreographic exploration with trees, I performed 10 - 30-minute-long movement improvisations exploring elasticity and touch as well as how to stay with a movement idea while improvising. I tried different ways to translate my basic practice during my field works to indoor practice. The following exercise was a starting exercise that I did regularly;

1. A fascia-focused training, 20 minutes.
2. Meditation, 5 minutes
3. Mindfulness of senses, 10 minutes, while doing simple movements.
4. 3 x 3 minutes of dance improvisation, following my first impulses.

I alternated this indoor practice with shorter outdoor sessions with trees in the neighbourhood to investigate a specific issue I was working on.

Elasticity and plasticity in bodies, trees, and climate work

An elastic movement in the body is a joint work by the fascia and the muscles. Walking and breathing are examples of everyday elastic movements we perform more or less consciously. When training the elasticity of the fascia the technique uses rhythmic movements against gravity or with the help of an additional force⁶⁶. You let go of your knees and bend them, let gravity take over and the associated fascia lengthens and then recoils when you bounce back up. If you sit on a chair and press with your right hand on the outside of your left thigh your upper body will spiral to the left. The associated fascia connected to the oblique muscle⁶⁷ is lengthened and when you let go of your pressure it recoils back. While doing so you train elasticity in the body with the help of an outer force, which is similar to when you stretch an elastic band and then let it snap back. The elastic capacity in fascia means that it can store and release movement energy. To train elasticity adds spring and buoyancy⁶⁸. K. Gurtner, the founder of Art of Motion, talks about the training of the fascia quality elasticity as resilience training, meaning the ability of a material to lengthen and then release that stored energy when it snaps back. She means that this can generate a sense of trust in your body as well as courage to perform new movements.

The concept of resilience in climate work is defined by the Stockholm Resilience Centre as the capacity of an individual, a forest, or a city to be able to change and at the same time renew at abrupt or gradual changes or disturbances in the environment. According to Centre science director Carl Folke, they have defined three terms for resilience: persistence, adaptability, and transformability.

I associate with the two qualities of the fascia, elasticity, and plasticity. Gurtner defines plasticity as melting and changing⁶⁹. She describes the fascia as plastic and therefore contributing to the shape of the body and movement. I think that both qualities can be used in life and to meet the climate crisis. To be able to handle change by both changing me and at the same time being elastic, like bending when the wind blows. When I rock with the trees and in the studio for a long time, I train the elastic quality of my body and

⁶⁶ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*.

⁶⁷ For the Swedish reader: "The oblique muscles" is the English name for "sneda magmusklerna".

⁶⁸ Buoyancy is also defined as a carrying capacity according to K. Gurtner, see Gurtner, Vance, and Savage, *Slings Essentials*.

⁶⁹ Gurtner, Vance, and Savage.

a slow change happens, the fascia is reshaped, and I become more resilient. According to forester Håkan Strotz⁷⁰ the same applies to trees, they are shaped by the environment they live in. In a windy environment, the wind swings them back and forth and their elasticity is maintained and strengthened. Over time, there is also a change in how they grow in this windy place. Another example is trees that grow in another direction when a rock is in the way. A change takes place, a new direction, and a reshaping is created, and we can much later see the traces of its movement can be seen. Just like my body carries traces and memories.

My process swings back and forth between flow and stop. I stop, start over, try to find new angles, stay put and get flow again. I am slowly changing. Change may not be a linear pathway but something which might happen through a rocking movement. By letting myself be influenced by the trees, letting myself be rocked, my relationship, my movements and my thinking also change.

In the above discussion, I have looked at the similarities between trees and the human body. I may fall into the trap of mirroring myself in the tree⁷¹ as J. Tassin talks about. Or that I am anthropomorphizing. But it is also possible that it was in the elasticity that I found a point of contact with the trees, through a physical encounter in the present moment. And that I was able to meet the tree to a certain extent in its 'plantness', as Dawn Sanders et al⁷² encourage.

Exploring elasticity

My artistic supervisor Rachel Tess gave me the assignment to improvise with elasticity as a starting point, to find out what other types of physicalities would be produced. Some of the physicalities that emerged while doing this assignment were; rock, bounce, swing, shake, rhythmic irregularity, twist, spiral, recoil, small collapse, writhe etc. Then some of these words were examined one by one, to explore what movements were generated. For example, I worked a lot with recoil, the rubbery movement out, collecting energy, and the simple and fast movement that bounces back, releasing energy. New questions arose which I examined, for example, how I could transport in space or go down to the floor while still working with recoil. Or what happened with

⁷⁰ Strotz, Håkan; forester, Ödeshög. Interview 2021-11-10.

⁷¹ Tassin, *Tänk som ett träd*.

⁷² Sanders, Snæbjörnsdóttir, and Wilson, "Beyond Plant Blindness."

the expression when trying it in different body parts, changing speed, rhythm, and directions.

I went on exploring what would happen when I combined two or more physicalities that were produced from elasticity. I worked with it and an interplay started to take shape. One day in the studio, I played with recoil and rocking. I examined both and tried to bridge them, after a long time, the two physicalities merged in some strange way. They became a rocking that with a certain irregularity created a recoil, where the body, seemingly without power, made a quick roll on the floor. I went on exploring other combinations.

When I rocked with trees, I noticed how the rocking travelled to different parts of the body through a shift of weight and through how I controlled my openness in the body. Indoors I investigated how this could be translated into my body without trees. How could the rocking motion travel different distances and to different body parts? Or how could I open my whole body and let the rocking travel all the way through?

I immersed myself in details, the small movements, the sucking ones, the incredibly slow ones, the sudden and irregular ones, and always returning to elasticity. Returning to how it feels when the rocking is transferred between hand, arm, and shoulder and stays there or travels down to the feet as well;

The feet

The small joint in the ankle

A small rocking rocking and let it swing

swing for a while

then

shift of focus

Exploring staying

The elasticity of the trees gave me, for some reason, the desire to stay at this point in my research. It allowed me to deepen and examine my resistance to the staying mode, to not abandon, which I discovered earlier in the process that I do a lot. I could say the work with the trees pushed me to find out how to stay with a movement idea and find out what it means, and how I can recognize it and perform it.

... working in the studio with the concept of staying

I have a hard time staying with a movement idea during the improvisations. The thoughts play tricks on me, and I get new movement impulses and images, which I immediately want to try. I'm making an effort not to. My fleeting intellect moves back and forth like an insect. What does it really mean to stay and how can I do it if I do not know what to stay with?

Stay, stay, stay, and thus feel.

I often abandon I prefer to flee.

A tree individual does not abandon it stays, does not abandon.

I recognize this problem from far back when I did a lot of dance improvisation, maybe I can approach it in a new way this time. What does it mean to stay, is it the same as repetition?, I ask Rachel Tess, who answers;

“Repetition is change, as the choreographer Deborah Hay says. It allows me to dance while thinking I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, and now I can move on. If nothing ever resurfaces... I think we're calibrated to repetition. You can also use repetition to create exhaustion.”

I continue to work in the studio and give myself new tasks, examining repetition as a way to practice staying and as a way to slowly change:

- Make a movement. Repeat it until you do not want to do it anymore, then repeat it even longer.
- Make a movement, repeat it, and slowly move on to something else, or make a total change and restart. Then return to the elastic movement.

Exploring twitching

Parallel to the work with elasticity and staying I explored the twitching physicality. The memory of my body's touching the many and different bark I have felt, and the softening into it, propelled this way of moving. In the dance solo in the final presentation, the twitching became part of a sequence where I alternated between twitching, smoothness and breathing.



Final presentation with trees



In this chapter, I will mention some parts of the process of creating the final presentation, which was shown on the 21st and 22nd of February 2022 at the Academy of Music and Drama, in Gothenburg.

Some of the questions I explored during the presentations last summer returned, either the same or further developed: What do I need to do to translate the experience of time? How make the audience be receptive to a tactile exploration? How choreograph for trees? Is dance always an act of will? Is it possible to see movements in nature as

choreography and/or as dance? I continued to reflect on and explore these questions throughout the making of the final presentation.

In the interactive performance installation, I choreographed pathways in the space trying to make a site where people could again feel free to walk, stand, sit, and lie in, to break the boundaries between the audience and the stage. I was careful with my choreographic choices to change the hierarchy between the trees and the human body. I choreographed the videos, starting with the whole tree and, going on with branches, leaves and finally the bark up close. I also explored how I could give time for the audience to slow down and immerse in the experience of the trees. However, I will not go into further details here.

TREES

While working outdoors with trees I did not think much about what a tree is, in a biological sense. When going indoors my mental curiosity took over and during interviews with forest biologist Sebastian Kirppu⁷³, forester Håkan Strotz and plant ecophysiological Johan Uddling Fredin⁷⁴, I could get to know a bit more about trees. For the final presentation, I put together a selection of texts about trees that I read during the installation. Here follows some examples:

Through the branches, leaves and roots, the trees try to get as much surface to the environment as possible. To increase its exchange capacity.

Trees are both slow and fast. Trees drop leaves and grow new ones every year. A branch can grow 1.5 meters in a year. An oak tree can be dying for hundreds of years.

Trees are elastic. They need movement to maintain elasticity as we humans do. In the human body, it's the fascia and muscles that provide elasticity. The elasticity does not decrease with age in trees, as it does in humans.

⁷³ Kirppu, Sebastian. Forest biologist. Interview 2021-10-21.

⁷⁴ Uddling Fredin, Johan. Professor in plant ecophysiology, University of Gothenburg. Interview 2021-11-12.

VIDEO

As mentioned earlier I started to film elements and events in nature already during my first period of fieldwork. I experimented and played with the camera in terms of angles and proximity, generating quite a lot of material. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, but intuitively I was not satisfied with a lot of the material generated. As time went by, I understood that I was trying to capture performative moments in and by nature. For example, an oak branch that moved with a certain quality or with a certain phrasing. Or aspen leaves that moved furiously fast and then they all, but one, stopped at the same time. Or a small part of a bark of a chestnut tree that created an interesting abstract pattern. I used to watch the moving of a branch, many intertwining branches, or a whole tree for longer times. After a while, the movements created a poetic sense. I asked myself how I could capture this on video and share it with an audience. Since dwelling with trees has a clear time component, I added the aspect of time and filmed the same branch or branches for up to 10 minutes. In the future, I will explore this part further and for example film for even longer times.

For the final presentation, I chose four videos and included them in the choreography of the installation. I decided not to post-edit the videos in terms of speed, since I wanted to show nature as it is not what I want it to be. However, the second video in the installation was an exception. It shows a rocking bare branch that makes a hinge-like movement and was filmed from a large beech in Wanås Sculpture Park. I stood on a thick branch and from there I experienced how the light impulses I hit the branch with, generated movements all the way out to the smaller branches. I watched and filmed these complex movements that both swing and shake at the same time, with different tempos and in different directions at the same time. Later when I did laboratory video work with the video artist Carolina Jonsson⁷⁵, she was attracted to this footage. She wanted to slow it down to see if that could bring out the movements even more. The slow-motion effect was striking. The movements appeared naked and turned into a composition.

The fourth and final video in the presentation was filmed already from the start with the slow-motion setting on my mobile and nothing was edited thereafter. The camera

⁷⁵ "Carolina Jonsson," Carolina Jonsson, accessed April 3, 2022, <https://www.carolinajonsson.com>.

slowly follows a trunk from below and up to the crown, as if the viewer was standing very close to the trunk. To me, this video was poetic and meditative with a strong present feeling. I ended my installation with this, as I wanted to offer the audience an opportunity for introspection.

SOLO/CHOREOGRAPHY

I continued working in the studio, focusing on creating a solo piece for the final presentation. I tried new ways of composing by not focusing on choosing singular movements, but on physicalities:

Elasticity and recoil in different body parts. Change of rhythm. Change of body part.

Movements travel inside the body. A change in rhythm changes the size of the movement.

Becomes part of the composition.

The small, small moving, listening and catching up the move. Still. Slowly begin again.

Irregularity. Unsynchronized movement. Twisting. Breathing. The thick branch.

The cracks of the bark in my body. The hard lines.

It pulls hard and gives bigger movements. Later, landing softly.

The openness from feet to hands to head. So soft when I find it. I am not a tree, but I can search the openness from one part of my body to the other.

The trees pushed me to presence, to staying and to sensing within. A new way of

moving emerged and was established through this work.

I explored how I could give myself entry points to the material, the improvisation and above all the explorative approach to the movements and the material. To be able to find it while performing for an audience. This was the hardest part and some days I did not at all find the way into the exploratory and open quality I was looking for. The open quality that I had experienced in the movements of the trees.

Four sections crystallized and became a score for the improvised solo. I also examined transitions between and within the sections. And found the following transitions: ritardando, echo, breathing branch, stop and listen for the next movement, prolong one movement slowly, and let the movement travel within the body. While improvising, “stations” began to emerge. Stations were points that I recognized and could rest in and listen to see what happened next. To accompany the journey in my own body, my mind had to surrender and listen to the body. In relation to the environment. And to time. Here I found the interaction between body, mind, and environment in relation to time, which Cooke et al⁷⁶ claim are prerequisites for a reconnection, as I mentioned early in the text.

Time was an important component in this choreography. I challenged time within my solo by staying longer in a movement than I normally would have done when improvising on stage. It was a challenge for me to do an improvised solo, with people sitting or standing very close to me. I tried to stay in one movement, and I tried to keep the exploring attitude in my dance solo while performing. I also challenged time during the whole installation by sustaining the length of each section, more than I would usually do.

All this work made me finally embody the movements of the trees. I could even begin to discern a new movement system.

⁷⁶ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, “Dwelling in the Biosphere.”

CONCLUDING COMMENTS ON THE PRESENTATIONS

I can see that by taking a stand against different places and their conditions, my material and my ideas have been processed in a way that I cannot see that they would otherwise have been done. Each space in each of the three presentations has pushed the material into different and new directions.

In all my exploratory presentations, I had a strong desire to share my experience with the audience, which well reflects a stage artist's desire for communication. To know if and what I communicated, I would have had to do, for example, follow-up interviews, which I did not. This was also not the aim of the project. Here follows some reflections from the response I received from audience members after my presentations, spontaneously right after the performances, or in emails and phone calls. Through this, I can deduce some of the effects my work had on others. Several people told me they got new perspectives on trees and on how they move, both through bodily experiences and reflections upon my work. Some talked about an inner kind of softening, inspiration and a deepened connection.



Softening

- conclusions

Soft touching
elastic moving

gentle rocking *releasing,* *recoiling, resting,*
and connecting

CHOREOGRAPHIC CONNECTION

I have searched for an embodied connection with trees by using both my tactile and kinaesthetic senses as a dancer. I have tried to get an honest connection via my body. But who am I to say I am connected?

However, I can say I have softened in my human-nature relationship. I prefer to use the word soft because it signals a process and an ongoing movement, not an endpoint. Through the explorative process and through time, my own experience is that I have deepened my relation to trees. And I have landed in an embodied connection to them.

From this practice, a new way of moving developed, and **a new movement system** emerged: *I started with the skin, which is the first layer of informing tissue, then reached deeper into the kinaesthetic sense via the fascia. I found my contact point through a process which led me from touching to contact improvisation and further to the swinging elasticity.*

I can notice that my body has softened. Before I was sharper in my phrasing, I cut off the lines, and I abandoned my movement ideas too quickly. Today I am more present and follow the movement, dare to stay still, dare to wait, letting my breathing lead. I move more organically.

Based on elasticity and the trees' way of moving, a new world has opened for me, that has changed my language of movement in depth.

It has also been a development of my choreographic methods as well as a new, and more profound way of understanding choreography. For example, how I can generate movement material from nature and then investigate and deepen it in the studio. I have gained several new tools for how to approach work to translate an experience in nature and additional theories and reflections into a choreographic piece. It has become important to me that my choreographic choices are intertwined with ecocentric thinking, to change the centre of attention.

It has not been my intention to perform a tree, but to let myself be influenced by it and search for a connection, and eventually to perform an embodiment of the movements of the tree. A method has started to emerge, and I will continue to use, explore, and hopefully deepen it in the future.

In the future, I will let the description of Cooke et al⁷⁷ of the ongoing interactivity between body-mind-environment through time, serve as a model for choreographic process work.

RECONNECT TO NATURE

I can see that the choreographic interactions and time spent with trees have been a dwelling, which has provided an embodied knowledge and experience of trees. I can see that my focus on exploring how to place trees in the foreground, has been an ecocentric approach. Humanization and anthropocentrism are concepts I want to continue to be careful with in relation to working with nature.

I think it's not easy to stop humanizing. Perhaps, as the religion historian D. Thurfjell⁷⁸ writes, humanization can help to understand and pay attention to trees and sow a seed for an environmental commitment that makes you want to work actively to protect the trees. But still, I agree with him that humanity needs to make a change and become aware of where we place ourselves in relation to nature. To become aware of when we,

⁷⁷ Cooke, West, and Boonstra.

⁷⁸ Thurfjell, *Granskogsfolk*.

for example through words put ourselves on top of the hierarchy. Since I am human, I will always have myself in the centre. However, the project shows me that it is possible to soften a bit into another balance in the relationship human environment and to become a bit more ecocentric.

My conclusion from my work is that I am only at the beginning of a relationship with trees. I still do not know what such a relationship really means. Thinking back on the experience I have had with trees, it reminds me of the feeling I had when I in the 90s did contact improvisation with people I never met before. How I, when I met them outside the studio, had a sense of knowing them, although we had never talked to each other. This is an example of where I am standing right now in my relationship with trees.

The anthropologists Cooke, West and Boonstra⁷⁹ talk about the importance of physically experiencing resilience, not only thinking about it. Through the exploration of elasticity in trees and my body and together with the Slings Myofascial Training⁸⁰, I have gained more buoyancy, somatic trust, and a reshaping of the way I move and how I connect movements in my body. I could say my body has slowly become more resilient and that I now have an embodied experience of it.

SOFTENING

To soften. To me, softening is a word in motion and being. Just like my relationship with trees and my relationship with my body. My body is affected by the stability and softness of the trees. The embodied experience of being able to bend and spring back, and slowly change is new to me. Also, the softening of the balance between mind-body-environment. A bit more body. A bit more trees. A bit more contact.

To soften into something is also to rest into something, something that carries me. The fascia that carries my body. The trees that carry my body. I soften into compassion. In a time of rapid changes, I soften into the rocking, the elasticity and the trust of the slow

⁷⁹ Cooke, West, and Boonstra, "Dwelling in the Biosphere."

⁸⁰ "Slings Myofascial Training - Art of Motion," accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.art-of-motion.com/en/slings>.

changing.

I have chosen the title *Softening*, not as a romantic desire for another world, or to ignore the difficult times we live in today. The title is both a result of my project and a call to *Soften!* For me, softening is a pathway towards a sustainable world.

A NEW MISSION

I do Slings Myofascial Training with Karin Gurtner. She invites us to sense the softening of the hips. And yes! I can feel the softening in front of the hips now. And yes! I can feel the softening in relationship to the climate catastrophe. I still get angry, but I also rest in the safe space within me that embodies the trees. The trees will survive, and maybe humans will survive. I have a new mission: to keep inviting people to trees, nature, and attention. To be able to offer artistic works that place the trees in the foreground and encourage to put a hand on the bark, lean against a trunk, hold a tree, and be rocked by it. And maybe also start or continue to build a relationship with trees.

FUTURE EXPLORATION

During the project, I became interested in, for me, rather unexplored performance formats for an adult audience, such as walking performances, interactivity and changing the audience's location. It has also been interesting to delve more deeply into what participation can be, and how I can, for example, invite people to participate on their own terms without feeling uncomfortable. This was not what I focused on investigating in my master's project. However, it is something I will continue to explore in the future.

One day when the wind is moving the top branches of a tree

Get out and

find a tall tree with a thin trunk

Put your ear close to the trunk and listen

listen intensively

Press your whole body close to the trunk

wait

(

wai

(

t

may be you feel the thick,

elastic movement of the trunk

may be you hear the creaking of the treetop

Thank you

Just as the trees are not alone in the ecosystem of the forest, I have not been alone in my project. You are so many, who through reflections, questions, commitment, trust, and ideas have contributed to this project. It has been so generous of you, and I want to thank you all. Many of you have given that little extra to me and my work and helped me on my way when there have been difficulties. I hope and think that you know who you are and what you have meant to me.

It has been a new and challenging experience to write about my artistic exploration. Besides the guidance from my three supervisors, I want to especially thank some people who have supported my text writing during the whole project: Camille Buttingsrud, Ann-Marie Tung-Hermelin, Anders Hagberg, Ingegerd Wennerbeck, Cecilia Lagerström, Lena Dahlén, Marisa Ponce de Léon and Kristin Rode.

I now end these two years which have affected my life on many levels. I believe that the change has just started, and I am looking forward to what it will bring in the future.

Thank you all!

Anna

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