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Performing Landscape – Swinging Together or Playing with Projections¹

Abstract

Swinging together is an experiment that involves performing with the projection of an image on the site of its making, including the image of others moving in the same swing at the same site. This text describes these initial experiments with participatory live events of swinging and with moving image projections on vegetation in Helsinki in 2014-2015. The experience of performing is reflected upon with the help of notions like haptic visuality (Marks 2007), and the performances are looked at as a form of expanded ecocinema (Rust, Monani & Cubitt 2013). The material-discursive practices (Barad 2007) in each case defined what mattered and what was excluded from mattering. The experiences of these variations point to the importance of the context for performance as research, and the value of repetition and small changes in circumstances, for generating unforeseen possibilities and meanings.

Introduction

Swinging together is an experiment that involves performing with the projection of an image on the site of its making and with the image of others previously swinging at the same site. It is a continuation and development of my previous explorations related to the three ecologies by Felix Guattari (2000) – roughly the subjectivity, the socius and the (global) environment. It is also related to my work with performing landscape as artistic research (Arlander 2012), with the difference that these experiments explicitly involved spectators as participants and performers. Thinkers developing posthumanist and new materialist ideas, like Rosi Braidotti (2013), Jane Bennett (2010) and Karen Barad (2007), have provided inspiration for these experiments, although I will here write about the practice mainly in a descriptive mode. Some ideas from film studies will serve as an aid in reflecting on my experiences, like the notion of haptic visuality in moving images, as discussed by Laura U. Marks' in *The Skin of Film* (2007), as well as ideas related to ecocinema presented by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013). These ideas provide a fresh angle to look at a practice, which I have previously discussed mainly through the lens of performance. (Arlander 2014b).

For those with experience of performance as research or practice as research (Allegue et al. 2009; Riley & Hunter 2009; Barrett & Bolt 2010, 2014; Barton, Dreyer-Lude & Birch 2013; Nelson 2013) it is easy to agree with physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad when she states: 'We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming' (Barad, 2007: 185). Importantly, for Barad 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' (Barad 2007: 335). She consequently refuses to separate discourse and materiality and prefers to speak of material-discursive practices. According to Barad:

experimenting and theorizing are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning [...] [they] are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of the phenomena produced (2007: 56).

The works I will soon describe are constituted by intra-acting from within specific circumstances and as part of the phenomena produced: in practices like performing landscape, there is no possibility of 'stepping outside' the environment. This is also methodologically important for much artistic research, where the researcher is literally producing phenomena, and not only observing them. However, if we follow Barad, the entanglement of the subject and object of study in artistic research or practice as research is merely one obvious example of something that concerns all forms of research or all kinds of engagements with the environment.

In the following I will first describe the three variations of swinging together, beginning with the initial performances for camera, and then the live performances with projections. After that I present briefly the idea of haptic visuality to describe my experience while performing and finally propose that these experiments could be seen as a form of expanded ecocinema.

Swinging Goes On While the Swinger Changes

The focus in my previous performances for camera and the resulting video works has been the relationship with the environment, where my body has served as a tool for focusing attention on changes in the landscape. In this case I started with a swing fastened in a tree, and ended up working with the spectators as participating performers. Even while performing solo, however, one is never alone, but work together with numerous co-authors and contributors, like the swing and the tree, or the camera on tripod, the changing weather and passers-by of all species.

Documenting people swinging in the same swing and editing their action into a continuous movement formed one part of the project *Year of the Snake - Swinging* (2014), described in a text exploring the term intra-action coined by Barad in contrast to the usual term interaction, which presumes that the interacting objects pre-exist the action.² In one of the video works created on Harakka Island, *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along* (26 min. 30 sec.) people visiting the island were invited to sit for a while in a small blue swing attached to an aspen on the western shore, approximately once a week during the year of the snake³ [http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-along/]. In *Year of the Snake – Swinging Along (mix)* (3 min. 40 sec.), based on the same material, I used images of myself swinging to fill in the gaps when there were no visitors [http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-the-snake-swinging-along-mix/] By editing the movement of the swing to seem continuous, one person is smoothly transformed into another in a continuous succession of swingers, although the swingers never met each other.

At the conference PSi #19 at Stanford University in California in 2013 I presented the project in a workshop⁴, which was documented in the video clip *Swinging with the Snake in Stanford* (52 sec.) [https://vimeo.com/69953101]. Another instance of swinging together took place as part of a workshop⁵ at a conference in Warwick, UK in 2014, documented in the video *Swinging at Warwick* (1 min. 29 sec.) [https://vimeo.com/104233709]. These

workshops were not conceived as artworks, but as experiential demonstrations, sharing the act of swinging with a group of people engaged in performance as research.

Projecting an Image on the Site of its Making

Based on these workshops at the end of the twelve-year project on Harakka Island⁶ I wanted to develop swinging together into a live performance. I had combined live action with the projected image of a similar action before⁷, but never projected a video onto the site where it was recorded. The Swedish artist Monica Sand's (2008) work with swinging, and a description of Lorie Novak projecting an image of her mother on vegetation at night (Hirsch, 2002) provided inspiration for outdoor projections.

During the summer 2014 I made two experiments with performances in two parts: The first part was a pre-performance with the participants swinging, documented on video. The second part was a solo performance with me swinging in relationship to the projected video documentation of that participatory event. In the autumn 2015 I made a third attempt using the same technique.

The first participatory pre-performance took place at the *t0NiGHt* event in Suomenlinna⁸. I fastened the small blue swing on a tree next to gallery Augusta, invited the public to swing, just before sunrise, documenting their swinging on video [https://vimeo.com/157896162]. For the actual performance *Swinging Tonight* at the next *t0NiGHt* event two months later⁹, the edited video was projected on the roof next to the tree, while I tried to swing synchronised with the swinging in the projected image for approximately 90 minutes¹⁰ [https://vimeo.com/103069308].



Figure 1: Swinging Tonight 23-24.5.2014. Video still: AA.



Figure 2: Swinging Tonight 25.8.2014. Photo: Antti Ahonen.

The second participatory pre-performance took place at the opening of the exhibition *Water Images* on Harakka Island on 29 May 2014. The swing was fastened to an old birch in the yard and visitors were invited to swing. An edited version of the documentation, [https://vimeo.com/157423805] was projected onto the same birch for a performance, *Swinging in Moonlight,* at the *Moonlight Party* on 9 August 2014. The projection was visible against the white trunk of the birch at night as a temporal and visual mixture, resembling a double exposure. Parts of the durational performance were recorded [https://vimeo.com/103242549].



Figure 3: Swinging on Harakka 29.5.2014. Video still: AA.



Figure 4: Swinging in Moonlight 9.8.2014. Video still: AA.

Contrary to the title of this text, Swinging Together, people in the pre-performances were not swinging together. They could witness each other swinging, however, and encourage each other to enjoy the experience of swinging. In the actual performances, where I was swinging together with their projected images, only their movement was discernible as a ghostly shadow with its own will. The projected image produced a 'magic' ambience entwined with the roof or the foliage, and created some form of equity in movement by turning everybody into contributors in the same continuous swinging.

The Body as a Screen

A third experiment, *Swinging Together*, took place in 2015 as part of the environmental art exhibition *LARU Human era 2015* at Särkiniemi peninsula in Lauttasaari.¹¹ To be near the only possible source of electricity I had to fasten the swing in a young and weak rowan. On Friday August 28 I invited passers-by in the park to swing¹², recorded them swinging, and edited the video for the performance on August 29 [https://vimeo.com/157428004].

At the opening, while waiting for the sun to set, the slowly appearing projection on the thin trunks of the rowan was visually more interesting than a fully visible projection. I invited the audience to swing and to lean back and look up at the sky through the foliage in order for them to experience the feeling. At nightfall I performed my attempt at synchronised swinging, not as a durational performance but only once, with the 20 min. video, for the small group of spectators who had patiently waited for the darkness with me. I performed also at the closing event on 4th October, but the first performance is the one documented on video. [https://vimeo.com/137770819]. Unlike in the previous versions, where the projection formed an independent shadow on the roof or the tree trunk, my body now turned into a projection screen, which merged with the environment and the movement of the swingers.



Figure 5: Swinging Together (Laru) 28.8.2015. Photo: AA.



Figure 6: Swinging Together 29.8.2015. Video still: AA.

In this third iteration of the performance three aspects of the event appeared in succession: a) a participatory aspect: the experiential performance of swinging, b) a visual aspect: the projection slowly appearing on the tree alongside the sunset, and c) the performance aspect: an attempt to swing in synchronicity with the projection. The performance included a dual exposure of the image, on the tree and on the human body, and a dual movement of the swing, recorded and live, synchronised or dis-synchronised. Due to the proximity of the projector and the camera, the performer fills the image space in the documentation, while the landscape recedes into its accustomed role as background. By being transformed into a projection screen and merging with the vegetation, the human figure nevertheless appears to dissolve into the environment.

Haptic Visuality

The idea of haptic visuality seems relevant to this last version of the performance, mainly due to the intimate space created between the projection on the tree and me watching it, as well as with the emergence of the human body as a screen. The concept is discussed by Laura U. Marks in The Skin of the Film - Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses (2000). She focuses on independent films that describe diasporic experiences, placing the phenomenon of intercultural cinema in a historical postcolonial context. She describes the infrastructure for funding and producing such films as well as the specific audiences addressed and involved, who are touched by the actual 'skin of the film'. Her idea that many intercultural filmmakers try to evade objectifying visuality and work with the blurring of vision in order to evoke other senses is connected to this work in some way. Projecting the image on a surface with a texture of its own, and the ghostly appearance of shadows of people not fully visible but discernible through their movement, resonates with her ideas. Not only this, but also in some sense the idea of repetition, of returning to the same place, looking at the same thing over and over again, trying to grasp what exactly is happening there, waiting for the details to come to life, all resonate with Marks' discussion. The context, however, is of course totally different.

Marks derives the term haptic visuality from the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl and defines it in her own way:

Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze (Marks, 2000: 162).

For her, haptic works 'invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what he or she is beholding. Such images resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all' (Marks, 2000: 162-163). This happens also when images are projected on uneven surfaces like trees. Marks further explains:

While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality' (Marks, 2000: 163).

The difference between haptic and optic visuality is a matter of degree, she notes; in most processes of seeing, both are involved. In my examples the materiality of the image is accentuated by the three-dimensional 'surface' the image is projected on, which partly distorts and dilutes the images. According to Marks '[h]aptic images are actually a subset of what Deleuze referred to as optical images: those images that are so "thin" and unclichéd that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them' (Marks, 2000: 163). Importantly, the haptic image 'forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative' (Marks, 2000: 163). For Marks '[h]aptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure' but 'encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image /--/ [and] does not require an initial separation between perceiver and object that is mediated by representation' (Marks, 2000: 164). Despite the fact that her focus on diasporic and intercultural experiences makes

relating Marks' ideas to this work somewhat questionable, her emphasis on haptic visuality does resonate with my experience while performing.

The projected image in *Swinging Together* is blurred and diluted on the thin tree trunks, the grass and the darkness, with mainly the movement of the swing discernible. In this case the environment, too, outdoors at night, reinforces a bodily relationship with the image, as does the double movement of swinging. The movement becomes the hook that the spectator can grab in order to see the images. Somewhat paradoxically, it seems that it is especially my own experience, however, while performing, that involves haptic visuality. Looking closely at the diffuse projection on the tree trunk next to me, while swinging, trying to distinguish and follow the movement in the vaguely discernible image, provided an intensely haptic and intimate experience. I did not actually see but diffusely sensed the movement on the trunks. For the viewers, watching the whole setup, following the diverging patterns created by the projection and the movement of the swing, the experience might have been much less haptic. My moving in the swing together with the movement of swinging in the projected image nevertheless produces a kind of double exposure for the viewer, which is combined with other movements in the environment. Although the image that is projected is not in itself haptic, the circumstances of the projection prevent any easy viewing and force the spectator to try to complete the image in a manner resembling haptic visuality.

Expanded Eco-cinema

Spectator effort is a phenomenon discussed in eco-cinema as well. Slowness and static images of long duration have been considered the hallmarks of an ecological approach to film. Scott MacDonald for instance defines certain films as eco-cinema primarily because they provide within the film experience an experience of nature that functions as a model for patience and mindfulness, characteristics of awareness that are decisive for a deep appreciation of and commitment to the natural environment (MacDonald, 2013: 19). For him, the main task of eco-cinema is not to produce traditional narrative films in Hollywood style to propagate an ecological awareness, nor to create traditional documentary films, although they can be useful. The task is rather to provide new kinds of film experiences, which offer an alternative to conventional modes of watching media and thus help to foster a more sensitive relationship to the environment (MacDonald, 2013: 20). The efficacy of this type of 'artistic' approach has been questioned as well (Ingram, 2013: 43). Some critics see the creation of eco-cinema as the creation of worlds in the same way as any films and point out that both ends of the production and consumption chain of cinema are rooted in a self-sufficient and active materiality that also resists them. This materiality offers itself to us as territory, earth, nature and resource, and at the same time retreats from us as time, death and mystery (Ivakhiv, 2013: 100).

One could also ask whether a focus on 'nature' as something separate is at all meaningful, and whether we should not better speak of nature-cultures (Haraway 2003). Despite this conceptual problem, the ideas related to eco-cinema are interesting regarding this practice. The suggestion to use long shots and slow down the frequency of image changes to help the viewer see what is going on in the environment makes sense on some level. In an exhibition context one can play with a seemingly static image including changes over time, and with rhythmic change, which is spellbinding as such. In a live performance – unless it is a durational one – the dynamic is different; change and

development are expected and they do take place in the perception of the work, whether one wants it or not.

In terms of the characteristics of eco-cinema, repetition and long shots with a static camera were used in all the swinging performances. There is a constant repetition of movement, a swinging back and forth in the image and in the performance; the camera does not move and the cuts are made invisible by the rhythm. Not much else in terms of action takes place; only the swingers change in the image, sometimes imperceptibly, and with them the rhythm, force, speed and span of the swinging. The tree, however, remains the same.

Concerning the environment, the three experiments of swinging together differ considerably. The first experiment was focused on the participating swingers and their performances, with the ash tree as mere support. The second version gave the birch tree a more prominent role. The third version, although placed in a wood, again foregrounded the human figure, and turned the body of the performer into a projection screen. In terms of the goals of eco-cinema – sensitising the viewer to the interdependencies and slow changes evident in the environment – to simply project an image of a tree back onto that tree might work better. Without human swingers claiming attention the tree could come to the fore, but the rhythmic movement of the swinging would be lost. Another approach, projecting large scale (still) images on vegetation as an activist gesture is *Amazonia* by Philippe Echaroux, who projects portraits of indigenous people on trees in the rainforest (Bush 2016).

There is something 'retro' in the use of the human body as a projection surface; it reminds us of much earlier experiments. Perhaps these performances of swinging could be related to expanded cinema rather than eco-cinema. The term is associated with Gene Youngblood's book *Expanded Cinema* (1970), relating to expanded consciousness and the early days of media art. The term could at that time refer to many kinds of works:

the elaboration of screen space, multi-projection as inter-related image, environmental documentation, environmental, diaristic, participation/events, installation, performance and other works which were a mixture of some or all of these. [--] One of its major contributions is its inclusion of live performance by the artists.¹³

Recently there has been a renewed interest in the history of expanded cinema (Rees et al., 2011) and the practices related to this contested term, ranging from early experiments in computer-generated imagery to immersive multimedia environments and live projection events. Some of the core concerns were liveness and presence, temporal and spatial experience, the use of the body, participation and authorship (Macdonald, 2013: 110-111), issues that are all relevant for these examples of swinging together and of projecting an image on the site of its making. Due to their use of a tree as an unconventional projection screen, the combination of moving image and live action, and the focus on the environment, these experiments could be understood as continuing the tradition of expanded cinema, albeit on a small scale.

Art historian Chrissie lles describes how early film and video installations in the 1960s presented two different approaches to space. In the tradition of expanded cinema some installations created environments with large-scale film projections and slide shows, which could be understood as communal dream spaces or metaphors of expanded

consciousness. At the same time, early video performances explored social space and the participation of the spectator in a strictly conceptual way. They utilised the possibilities of real-time mirroring and live feedback recording offered by new video technology (Iles, 2000: 252-53). In some sense these experiments of swinging together with projections combine aspects from both traditions. They produce a communal dream space while showing the mode of production in the real time of performance. Thus, we could perhaps call them experiments in expanded eco-cinema.

Conclusion

When watching the video documentation of the performances the various phases in the process of creation lose their individual importance and the image seems to consist of various layers of light. In the moment of performing and witnessing the performance the physical surroundings, the feel of the vegetation and the ground, the darkness, humidity and chill of the night as well as the bodily presence of other witnesses all contribute to the 'magic' of the projected image. Based on these initial experiments, projecting an image back to the site of its making, and performing with the projected image of participants, are both worth exploring further.

Considering the materiality or the material-discursive practices involved in these experiments, the main collaborators or intra-acting components were the tree, the swing, and the body, although the balance between them varied slightly in all three versions. Other components of intra-action involved the surrounding vegetation, the human spectators or contributors (including their participation, willingness to perform and be recorded), the technology (including the machines for recording, editing and projecting the videos), and the various forms of light (including sunlight or darkness and electric light). Further material-discursive practices relate to the idea of performance (including the conventions of gathering together to watch people engaged in an activity and the notion of doing an action rather than representing an action) and to the concepts used in the discourse of moving images, of which the above-mentioned notions haptic visuality, eco-cinema and expanded cinema are just a few.

Methodologically the experiences of these variations of swinging together point to the importance of the context and the set up for performance as research, as well as the value of repetition and small changes in circumstances, for generating what might emerge as unforeseen possibilities and meanings due to a slight shift in emphasis. In these cases, no pre-planned variations of the 'experimental arrangement' were included; the shifts occurred simply by adapting to changing circumstances.

The various expectations of the organisers, audiences and participants, including me, as well as the situational circumstances during the pre-performances and the actual performance events, produced variations in emphasis. The differing material-discursive practices of the three contexts – an all-night performance art event, an opening of a summer exhibition and a party, an environmental art exhibition – defined what was considered a meaningful contribution (i.e. a performed action, an opportunity for experiential participation, a poetic image). They delineated which elements were understood as part of the work and which were circumstantial (i.e. the performing body, the projected image, the movement, the surroundings), and determined what was deemed important or incidental. Using the terms of Barad one could say that matter and meaning were intra-actively produced in differing ways, due to the shifting entanglements and

agential cuts involved in each version, which were conditioning what mattered and what was excluded from mattering.

Video Links

Year of the Snake – Swinging Along 2014 (26 min. 30 sec.) HD 16:9 http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-snake-swinging-along/

Year of the Snake – Swinging Along (mix) 2014 (3 min. 40 sec.) HD 16:9 http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-the-snake-swinging-along-mix/

'Swinging at Warwick' 29th July 2014 (I min 29 sec.) https://vimeo.com/104233709

'Swinging with the Snake in Stanford' 27th June 2013 (52 sec.) <u>https://vimeo.com/69953101</u>

'Swinging Tonight' 23 May 2014 (15 min 33 sec) <u>https://vimeo.com/157896162</u>

'Swinging Tonight' 25th July 2014 (1 min 1 sec.) http://vimeo.com/103069308

'Swinging on Harakka' 29 May 2014 (24 in 46 sec) https://vimeo.com/157423805

'Swinging in Moonlight' 9th August 2014 (4 min 11 sec) <u>http://vimeo.com/103242549</u>

'Swinging Together (Laru)' 28 August 2015 (21 min 33 sec) https://vimeo.com/157428004

'Swinging Together' 29 August 2015 (21 min 20 sec) https://vimeo.com/137770819

Notes

³ The recordings took place between 10 February 2013 and 28 January 2014.

¹ This text is based on the presentation 'Performing Landscape - Swinging Together', at *Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology, Relationality. VI Conference of New Materialisms* in Melbourne 27-29.9.2015.

² The paper 'From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape', was presented at V Annual Conference on New Materialisms, New Materialist Methodologies – Gender, Politics, The Digital in Barcelona 25-26.9.2014 and later published as Arlander, Annette 'From interaction to intra-action in performing landscape',in Beatriz Revellez Benavente, Ana M. Gonzalez Ramos, Krizia Nardini (coord.). 'New Feminist Materialism: Engendering an ethic-onto-epistemological methodology". *Artnodes*, 14,: 26-34.

⁴ The workshop Porous Studio was organised by the Artists' Committee of PSi (Performance Studies International) on June 27th 2013.

⁵ Juan Manuel Aldape Munoz, Stephanie Bauerochse and Annette Arlander prepared the workshop in Warwick on 29 July 2014 for the meeting of the Performance as Research Working Group of IFTR (International Federation for Theatre Research). Some questions inspired by Michael Marder's book *Plant-Thinking, A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) were presented to the swingers.

⁶ For a brief description of the project, see Arlander, Annette 'Performing Landscape for Years', in *Performance Research*: On Time 19-3: 27-31.

⁷ The first experiment was *Tuulikaide – Wind Rail* in 2002, a live performance where I posed with projections in Kiasma Theatre in Helsinki. See 'Tuulikaide – Eräänlainen alku' / 'Wind Rail – Sort of a Beginning' *Ruukku – Studies in Artistic Research* 1 (2013). https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=42484

⁸ The night between 23 and 24 May 2014.

⁹ The night between 25 and 26 July 2014.

¹⁰ Only the first minute of the performance was recorded.

¹¹ For an idea of the context, see <u>http://www.laruart.com</u>

¹² My initial plan was to invite the artists participating in the exhibition to swing, which proved too difficult to organise.

¹³ These are categories mentioned in Expanded Cinema 1-10th April. Programme notes for the Expanded Cinema season at the Arnolfini gallery in 1976.

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Biography

Annette Arlander is an artist, researcher and a pedagogue. She is educated as a theatre director, MA (philosophy) and DA (theatre and drama). At present she is visiting researcher at Academy of Fine Arts University

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