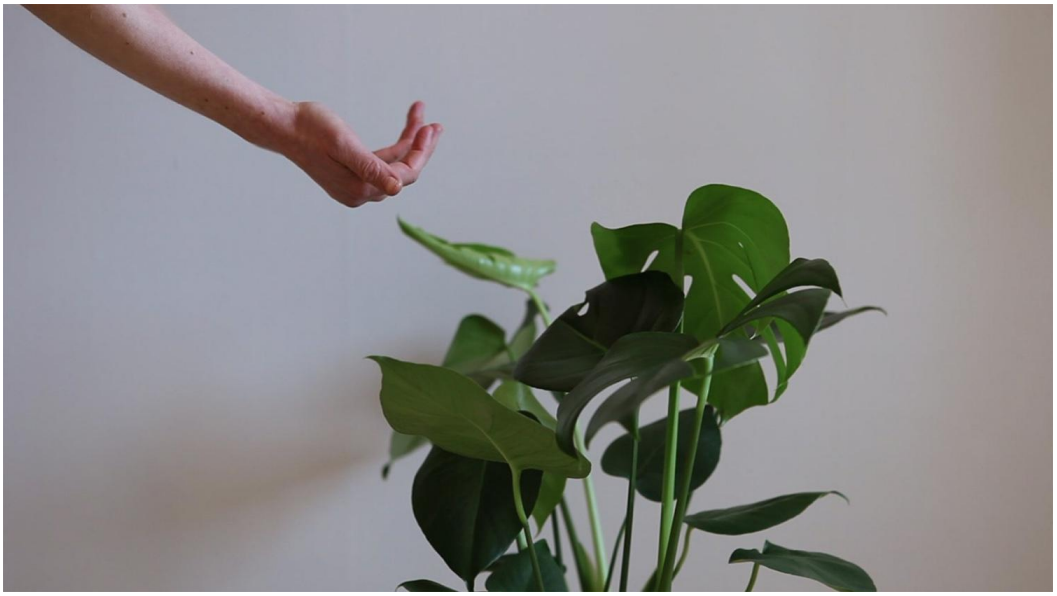
Plants, love, and multispecies engagements

A conversation from Finland

by Essi Kausalainen, Robyn Maree Pickens

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Aotearoa art writer, poet, and occasional curator Robyn Maree Pickens met Finnish performance artist Essi Kausalainen at Saari Residence in Finland at the start of 2020, initiating a dialogue that continues through this commission for HUM.

Each year, Saari Residence in Finland hosts 26 international residents. Saari Residence used to be an estate, so the accommodation, communal, and administrative buildings (and sauna) are spread over a large area surrounded by farmland. My cohort of residents included a composer, two dancers/choreographers, a documentary filmmaker, an artist/filmmaker, a PhD student, and an artist. Although there is a consideration of residents' interests and practices in the selection process, proposals and timetabling are subject to change, so the synergies of any given group are to a certain extent emergent rather than determined in advance. During my residency I worked on a research-based poetry project in which I examined Hannah Arendt's theory "amor mundi" (love of the world) to see whether it could inform ecological poetry (poetry that is directed towards the unfolding socio-ecological crisis). Theoretically and poetically, I began working on an "eco-poetics of love" based on Arendt's amor mundi. The location of Mietoinen/Mynämäki—with its warming climate and reduced snowfall (it was the warmest winter on record)—was an important place to consider theoretical and creative approaches to the Anthropocene.

ROBYN MAREE PICKENS For the first two months of 2020 I held a writing residency at Saari in rural southwest Finland, and one of the highlights was meeting you Essi, as Saari's invited artist for 2020. During your presentation to our group of eight residents you gave an overview of your performance-based practice, which seeks to embody ethical corporeality and coexistence with the "more-than-human world".[01] When you discussed Michael Marder's concept of "plant thinking",[02] Luce Irigaray, mycorrhizal fungi, and the multispecies opera you were working on, I had a feeling we would have a lot in common. In your practice and work, I catch a glimpse of what some of my ideas and writing might look like as embodied performances. Where you use your body to explore sensuality, symbiosis, coexistence, and ethical materiality, I use words. But, as we both discovered through our dialogue, these manifestations involved, or were enlivened by conscious encounters with nonhuman sentient beings such as plants and trees. And of course, for these encounters to take place, we acknowledged that a certain openness, vulnerability, and yes, love, was necessary. I'm interested in developing, practicing, and creating from these affective states as ethical ways of being with the rest of nature (human and non-human), particularly in this time of unfolding socio-ecological crises and climate injustice, and I sense synergies with your work, especially the multispecies opera currently under production. Could you outline this work and its impetus?

ESSI KAUSALAINEN The operatic performance you refer to is called *Thousand Times Yes*, which was made in collaboration with composer Marja Ahti and librettist Jenny Kalliokulju. It's the story of a human called G, unwillingly equipped with the ability to mediate "more-than-human bodies". For G the whole world is singing; G is alert to the other characters: Bee, a choir of Microbes and a Stream of water flushing through the pipes. These bodies approach G when an ancient underground creature called MA rises to the surface, shaking the whole ecology around it. G is asked to mediate between the conflicting parties, but she would rather ignore the bad news. While the performance is telling this story of listening, of coming together in our differences, it is actively (and lovingly) challenging the operatic tradition. Instead of romantic

love, there is universal love, instead of witnessing any of the character's deaths there is ego death… We are interested in thinking about the form of opera as democratic. What if there is no hierarchy between the music, the text, the performance, and the visuals, but rather all of these elements are approached as equals? What does it mean to have different kinds of voices on stage: classically trained alongside untrained, including a child, all mixed together with field recordings and electronic soundscapes? Personally, this project is an attempt to address the complexity of my experience as a body in this living world. It is also an attempt to rethink some of the conventions and the politics of performance, and the art world in general. All of these desires dwell in states of vulnerability and love that you mention. And from my exchanges with other-than-human (mainly plant) bodies.

Writing about the opera makes me think about the importance of communities, collectives and companions. I wonder how you Robyn, as a writer, weave rhizomes around your practice? Who do you connect with and how? Do you have specific collectives or individuals in the human, plant, animal, mineral, fungi realm who help you to write your way through?



Mietoistenlahti Bay was visible from Saari's manor house which was converted into dining, communal, and administrative spaces. The bay was a short walk from the residence grounds. For several weeks the waves in the bay froze repeatedly, causing pack ice to form. Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.



Robyn's accommodation at Saari Residence, Finland, which she shared with three others. "Each resident had their own self-contained apartment but shared a kitchen. Historically this building housed the estate's workers." Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.



Communal space and studios at Saari Residence, Finland. Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.

RMP As I read your response Essi, I immediately seized on the word "crisis" which we are most certainly in with Covid-19. I would like to stay with this theme a little longer to make two

interrelated, though not necessarily original observations: it is (understandably and without judgement) the human casualties of Covid-19 that make this virus perceptible as a crisis in a way that climate crisis could not fully engage most of us, and that the emergence of coronavirus is commensurate with human pressures on the "more-than-human world". Crises, as we know, are irrevocably linked with human-nonhuman ecologies, and we cannot always determine in advance how and in what way they will manifest.

Covid-19 for me is a crisis of loneliness and isolation under lockdown. I mention this because it intersects with your question regarding the importance of communities, collectives, and companions. As I write of loneliness and isolation I recognise that these particular emotional states, however difficult, may seem luxurious to those fighting for breath. Here in Aotearoa, a household/bubble of one is currently permitted to join with another bubble of one, so after three weeks of isolation I visited my bubble friend for the first time yesterday. Due to various commitments and factors we will most likely see each other on a weekly basis. In the absence of IRL interactions with people, will I, as I had imagined a couple of weeks ago, pursue more active or conscious encounters with plants and trees? Or will the lure of the digitally mediated world, however insufficient, act as a stronger pull as autumn bleeds into winter earlier than expected?

I am reminded of Michael Marder's concept of "plant-thinking." For Marder, "plant-thinking situates the plant at the fulcrum of its world, the elemental terrain it inhabits without laying claim to or appropriating it".[03] What does it mean to approach a plant or tree from a position of enforced loneliness and isolation? Is it possible for me not to act in an appropriative way towards a plant or tree? How will I know? So, the rhizomes I am currently weaving around my writing practice at this time of crisis and isolation include heightened attention to questions that shape what I do more generally. These questions include: what kind of consciousness or affective state is guiding me as I write? Can I identify subterranean intentions, such as the desire to resist appropriative interactions with the plant world, and reorient them if they're off track? And quite simply, am I being honest?

Marder's invitation to perceive a plant as the focal point of its own world, to resist appropriation, makes me think of Hannah Arendt's definition of the Latin phrase *Amo: Volo ut sis* which is translated either as 'I love you: I will you to be,' or 'I love you: I want you to be.' Arendt writes, '[i]t is the affirmation of the other who is loved for his [sic] own sake and not as an object of desire… not "I want to have you" or "I want to rule you"'.[04] These valuations of the other seem to offer ethical guidelines for engaging with plants and trees in a time of crisis-inducing loneliness and isolation.

I wonder if I can return the question and ask you who your communities and companions are at this time of social distancing? And whether Covid-19 has made you reconsider the interspecies relationships and presence of crisis in *Thousand Times Yes?*



Essi Kausalainen, *Thousand Times Yes* rehearsal, Saari Residence, Finland. Photo: Laura Cemin.



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Essi Kausalainen, *Thousand Times Yes* rehearsal, Saari Residence, Finland. Photo: Laura Cemin.

EK Your words, Robyn, open so many beginnings in me that it is difficult to keep my thoughts on a straight path. I hope you don't mind the potential zigzagging and wandering. Although I have been exploring the porous nature of our bodily existence for years in my art, it has never felt quite so acute as it does now. Neither has the need to connect, to share, to collaborate been so strongly articulated in my own being. While the world is rearranged and daily routines are mutated, it seems elemental to observe what comes to the surface.

It is curious that during Covid-19, the isolation seems to be both the root of the problem (our historical psychic isolation from the rest of nature), and the mandated solution. In the opening scene of *Thousand Times Yes*, G is doing her very best to cut herself out of

the complex web of interconnectedness by pretending not to hear the voices of the world. She convinces herself that she is a self-contained individual in charge of her own existence. But in the world in which she is situated, this attitude can only cause friction and drama. She cannot isolate herself from all the bodies—the insects, fungi, microbes—around her. To deal with the crisis, to mediate between the conflicting parties, G has to allow the world to enter.

My own practice with plants started in a somewhat similar setting when I was in a professional and personal dead end. Like G, I was suffering from a serious case of disconnection, and there was simply no joy left in me. And I do not know how I could have found my way out without vegetal guidance.

It was a group of trees near the hospital where I was staying that woke me up. In my state of exhaustion I had only enough energy to take a small walk every day. On these walks I started to connect with the trees that marked the point where I had to turn back. They were always there, beautifully indifferent to my presence, yet utterly open and alert to their environment. Even in my state of exhaustion I could recognize their flourishing. Witnessing that made me curious, it made me feel joy. And the joy helped me to connect with the vitality within my own being.

Soon after, the whole vegetal kingdom in its vast variety became visible to me. They had of course always been there, but in my arrogance and neglect I had refused to let them in. These plant beings helped me to understand that the isolation I felt was a fabulation: that my being begins with a communal process, and is an inseparable part of a much larger ecology. These trees with their hundreds of years of bodily experience helped me put things in scale. I have rarely felt lonely after this. There is so much life, such strange bodies and beings all around and within me. Even during this time of social isolation. Obviously I miss my human collaborators tremendously, but they are with me in the texts, textiles, movement and soundscapes I work with — perhaps more so than via screened meetings. What I miss most is touching: getting my hands dirty with the world.

The Hannah Arendt quote you shared Robyn, touches me very deeply. It is difficult to find another word than love to describe my gratitude and affection towards plants. Yet, in our culture, love is too often closely tied to romantic connotations. But love as an attitude of wanting the other to be, holds the aspects of respect and curiosity I feel towards the plant beings that guided me out of my disconnection. And this is very much what I feel with all my collaborators — human and others. As a director and collaborator, my job is to make space for the performers and my companions to bloom, for them to be seen in their full beauty.

I am wondering Robyn, how *Amo: Volo ut sis*, or the practice of love, is present in your writing practice? Especially in this strange time of isolation and (primarily) virtual connectedness. How can one practice love in language? And who can be loved? Who are the bodies and beings we "will to be"? What are the gestures of inclusion and exclusion made in our practice? Is it possible to will all the bodies to be?



Mynamaki community project with children. "Saari Residence has a permanent community artist, Pia Bartsch, who acts as a bridge between the Saari residents and the small, local community. One project Pia worked on during my stay involved workshops with local children to think about ecological crisis. This exhibit of their work was installed in Pia's studio/exhibition space in nearby Mynämäki." Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.



Winter. "Although there were hard frosts, and it was freezing (by definition), there was hardly any snow and it was the warmest winter. Finland's most important ski event was cancelled for the first time since it began decades ago." Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.

RMP I'm going to move in the direction of your extraordinary questions Essi, but I'd like to begin with the dichotomy you identified in the character of G, the protagonist of *T housand Times Yes*, particularly as it relates to our unfolding socio-ecological and virological crises. In simple terms, it is arguably G's initial relational inadequacies with the rest of nature—her disconnection—that contributes to the disequilibrium of the human-nonhuman world. When G enters into relational exchange as a participatory being she finds she has skills she can offer. For many of us, Covid relationality forecloses, or at least delimits many of the embodied relational exchanges that characterise our everyday lives (not that they were often oriented towards nonhuman beings). Our current isolation—as a result of a virological event—stems from our abuse of human and nonhuman beings, which has entailed, and continues to entail rupture, violence, and disavowal.

So what activities might engender connection, non-violence, and avowal of human and nonhuman lives that remain, to borrow Judith Butler's term, "ungrievable" and therefore not fully recognised as worthy when living?[05] The encounters you had with that group of trees near the hospital strike me as one such mode of recovering a relational ethics with nonhuman beings. To understand, as a result of these threshold experiences, that isolation is a "fabulation" is incredibly compelling, and I am in awe of the depth and breadth of the transformative impact of your serial encounters with trees. As I consider your experiences, and my own recent neighbourhood walks in and around the Dunedin's town belt, I am, on one hand, aware of the living, breathing vitality and aliveness of the trees (and other symbiotic exchanges), and of my privilege to live nearby and easily access this vital expression of life. I am enlivened; my sense of loneliness is temporarily abated, and I live with the awareness that other people do not have the ability to access ancestral lands or flourishing plants and trees. And that a city's lungs (its parks) are vestiges of the nonhuman (and in some cases human) lives that no longer exist. What I am getting closer to articulating here is a relationship between love and mourning, a dynamic I am in the process of exploring in my writing, particularly as I work towards the overarching thesis statement of my PhD, which is concerned with aesthetic responses

to socio-ecological crises. Even as I love these trees and the native birds that extend their animation, I simultaneously mourn deforestation, and the amputation of people from ancestral homelands. Love in language and love in practice attempts to become attuned to the vitality of life and to what has been and will continue to be lost through the ongoing monetisation and extinction of life. It is perhaps to realise and hold together the flourishing of life and the destruction of life, and to work on reducing the extent of its destruction. This requires that I am present to myself as much as possible, including during the act of writing, so that I can write from my fully engaged being that is relationally connected with, and dependent on the rest of life. This is the foundation of what I try to do as a writer, and is the intention I've set for this text. Perhaps this could be seen as an attempt to practice love in language.

But yes, who, and how do we decide who is loved? I think we (and who constitutes "we" must be interrogated) must say a thousand times yes to relational exchanges that are ethically alert and responsive to those whose lives may not be accorded the same value as other lives (including all minorities and nonhuman lives) and remain aware of our blindspots, privilege, or oppression. In light of this, I now wonder if "will"—as in, "I love you: I will you to be"—carries a sense of a masterful, hierarchically ascendant individual who has power to bestow or uphold the life of another. As you said, we are communal beings, so how can we have these discussions as communities, rather than as individuals?

I have written a lot and must leave a couple of your questions unattended, but I will let them inform my last questions to you. Can a virus be loved? Could a microbe be the central protagonist? Is it because of our almost total focus on the human self instead of the entangled human-microbe-earthworm assemblage, and our dependence on language, that it becomes untenable to imagine the microbe as G?



"Each resident had an individual shoot with a professional photographer: Jussi Virkkumaa. I chose to be photographed with the plant who I shared my apartment with. Finland can be fairly bleak in winter in terms of vegetation, so right from the beginning this plant was important to me."



Town belt, Ōtepoti, 2020. Photo: Robyn Maree Pickens.

EK Sometimes I think it is easier to love a virus than another human being. The way a virus is using its agency is so wonderfully straightforward: it is doing what a virus is supposed to do with its full existence. Compared to that, the incredible contraction of a human's being and doing—the arrogance, the greed and conflicting desires—seems so terribly messy.

Regarding your comment about thinking as communities, I find myself turning towards the mutualistic relation of mycorrhiza: a body that is created by fungi and plant together. Around 80% of all plants live in this kind of a relation with fungi. Mycorrhiza is a place where the plant and fungi body meet and enter each other at the cellular level to share nutrition and information. The two differently shaped bodies meet and send signals. The plant builds a "tunnel" within its cells for the fungi, and the fungi waits until given permission before entering. Then they live together for the rest of their lives. What is fascinating, in this queer interspecies coming-together with consideration and care, is that both the plant and the fungi have several companions. This enables a whole community, such as a forest, to connect, to share nutrients and messages. Like any relation, it is not always equal. But it is in the interest of all the different bodies to make the whole community thrive. They are each other's environment. For me it is inspiring and helpful to think that these bodies exist. These mutualistic ways of growing and being are happening everywhere around us. All the time. It is not a utopia or a fabulation.

Robyn would like to thank the staff at Saari Residence (funded by the Kone Foundation) who made her feel utterly supported: Leena, Pirre, Iiris, Pia, Heidi, the other January-February 2020 residents, and of course Essi.

Footnotes

01. The value of what is not human is signalled by the word "more" in this phrase which also attempts to revise the problematic word "nature," particularly its associations as a "backdrop" for human activity. See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Abram#:~:text=In%201996%20Abram%20coined%20the,a%20phrase%20within%20the%20lingua

02. Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), and Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

03. Marder, 2013, p. 8.

04. Tatjana Noemi Tömmel, 'Vita Passiva: Love in Arendt's Denktagebuch', in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt's Denktagebuch*, ed. by Roger Berkowitz and Ian Storey (New York: Fordham University, 2017), pp. 116, 117.

05. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), p. 20.

Biographies



Essi Kausalainen is a Helsinki based artist whose works operate through performance, textile, text, audio and video. Collaborating with plants and fungi, artists, musicians, plant biologists and children, Kausalainen's work approaches the body as an open ended process made in, and shaped by, the complex relations with other beings, situations and environments. Her work has been exhibited and performed in venues such as Somerset House in London, Uppsala Arts museum, Moderna Museet Malmö, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Nikolaj Kunsthal Copenhagen, and SAVVY Contemporary Berlin.



Robyn Maree Pickens is an art writer, poet, occasional curator, and a critical/creative PhD candidate in ecological aesthetics at the University of Otago, Aotearoa New Zealand. Robyn's art writing has appeared in ArtAsiaPacific online, ANZJA, Art + Australia online, The Pantograph Punch, and Art New Zealand. Her poetry has been published in Empty Mirror (US), Into the Void (Canada), Peach Mag (US), SAND Berlin, amberflora (UK), Cordite (Australia), Plumwood Mountain (Australia), Matador Review (US), Jacket 2 (US), at ARTSPACE, Auckland, in the Brotherton Poetry Prize Anthology (London: Carcanet Press, 2020) and in Fractured Ecologies (Ålborg, Denmark: EyeCorner Press, 2020). Robyn Maree Pickens.

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