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Letters to a Pine A Video Essay

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Article abstract

Three letters to a small pine tree written as part of an online performance in October 2020 are compiled and edited into a video essay, with reflective and explanatory commentaries inserted after each letter. The video essay serves as an example of how PAR (performance as research) methodologies can “challenge the epistemological assumptions concerning the concept of research” and how they can “reinvigorate academic conventions” of presenting research results in conferences and publications. The most relevant question is whether performance practices, such as writing letters to trees next to the trees, can serve as an aid for an academic as well as an art audience to focus their attention on trees and other beings with whom we share this world.

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Letters to a Pine: A Video Essay

Annette Arlander

Letters to a Pine: [link to video essay](#).



Video still, *With a Pine I* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

Transcription of the Voice-Over

October 31, 2020

Dearest pine,

I hope you don't mind that I address you in English this time. The reason is that I am participating in an international Live Art event¹ with other people performing with trees in other parts of the globe, or on the earth. And that takes place via Zoom, with the help of my phone, right behind me. As you might remember, or then not, last time we met I thought I would say goodbye for a while, and that I felt that our contact or communication was not really going anywhere. . . Well, if you start a relationship with a tree you cannot really expect it "going anywhere," at least not literally. Trees are sessile beings par excellence, reliable to stay where they are "till death do us part," as they say. But I meant that I did not really feel you were interested in communication, or perhaps simply, brutally, that I was no longer inspired by you. I did not like myself in your company; I did not like the thoughts that came to me while in your company—whether they were induced or inspired by you or not. That said, when this opportunity to join in

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an event with other tree lovers occurred, I immediately thought of you! One reason for that was quite practical; the ferryboat to the island where I have most of my tree friends does not run any longer—it stopped for the winter. And although I have a rowing boat, and today the weather is very calm, perfect for rowing across, I could not know that beforehand. You live here right next door to me, in the centre of the south of Helsinki, and in a funny place right up on the rocky hill, alone, so it is relatively easy to perform together with you, without other trees, bigger and more spectacular ones, catching all the attention. The rocks are frequented by people, of course; this is a public park, and in summertime there are plenty of parties here. Now only one family is playing around nearby, and they will probably not stay for long. The chilly weather has made your little birch companion to let go of their leaves, but some trees, like the alders, are still green. More people coming—funny, I did not expect that, but, if they don't disturb you, then I will not be disturbed either. Complaining kids! That is the last thing you would imagine a small pine tree would be surrounded by. It is a strange place to live that you have chosen (or perhaps you did not have much choice, actually, simply landing here)—not because it is a public park, but because there is so little soil in the small crevice where you are rooted with the birch. Probably your root is working hard to press forward downwards towards the centre of the earth. This is at least what philosopher Emanuele Coccia (2018) claims. Plants grow actively in two directions, up towards the sun, and down towards the centre of the earth. So, you are a cosmic being, like the famous world tree! Some strange noise from the shore behind me is getting louder; is it a boat or a truck or what? It seems hardly to move... I wonder if you sense the vibrations—probably. Such low frequencies are making “bigger waves,” so to speak, if I remember correctly. . . I am going to write three separate letters to you, in order to be able to turn off and on again my video camera. Although the Zoom event is recorded somehow, I also wanted to make an “ordinary” video of this longer meeting. And because my video camera can record only twenty-one minutes at a time, this hour will be divided in three twenty-minute slots. So, I will leave you for a moment, and then come back again, soon. I will be lucky to be able to check if my phone is still working, too. . .

*

This video essay, “Letters to a Pine,” based on material written during a collective online performance on October 31, 2020, relates to all four topics mentioned in the call to this issue—knowledge, power, ethics, and affect—by demonstrating and discussing how to perform with trees as an intervention into dominant notions of who and what can perform. In this essay, I am suggesting that beyond our ongoing performance of trans-corporeal exchanges with vegetation in the world, deliberate artistic performances can be developed to intervene in the continuous disregard of plants.

The practice of writing letters to trees was first undertaken as part of the project *Performing with Plants* (Arlander 2016), hosted by Stockholm University of the Arts in 2018 and 2019, and funded by the Committee for artistic research at the Swedish Research Council. Published examples of letters include “Writing with Trees” (Arlander 2022c), “Dear Olive Tree” (Arlander 2021), and “Dearest Pine” (Arlander 2020a). This particular instance of performing with trees by writing letters to a small pine tree in Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki took place within the context of another project, which was developed based on experiences of the previous one, namely *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* (Arlander 2020b). Within this project, I have explored further modes of addressing trees in writing. The letters written to a tree in front of the video camera in Finnish, Swedish, or English were often later transcribed, read and recorded, and edited as a voice-over to the video, sometimes translated and added as English subtitles as

well. In this case of writing to a small pine tree during the collective online performance organized by the Becoming Tree project, only the action of writing was visible; the resulting text was not shared with the audience.

These letters serve as an example of how PAR (performance as research) methodologies can, on the one hand, “challenge the epistemological assumptions concerning the concept of research,” and how they can, on the other hand, “reinvigorate academic conventions” of presenting research results in conferences and publications.² To what extent can imaginative approaches—like addressing trees in writing—function as useful research methods? Do we learn something about pine trees by writing letters to them? Or, rather, do we learn something about writing, and especially about letter writing, by writing letters to trees? Perhaps the most relevant question is whether art practices, such as writing letters to trees next to the trees, can serve as an aid to focus attention on trees, and by extension other beings that form our “environment” or our shared habitable world.

This specific video is compiled for the publication at hand and has not been presented at an academic conference, nor shown as an installation or in a screening in an art exhibition. Other similar letters, however, have served as research results in both contexts. One example is “Hanging in a Pine – with text,” a video made for a performance lecture at a philosophy conference in Amsterdam (Arlander 2019a), which has also been shown as a three-channel installation called “Swinging – With a Pine – Hanging” at an exhibition in Helsinki (Arlander 2019b). Here I propose that this video essay, too, can exemplify how in the context of artistic research, the same material can be made to serve as an artwork and as a research presentation, often with very small adjustments.³

The three-part letter written in English was the last in a series of letters written to the same small pine tree in Helsinki in Swedish during 2020,⁴ continuing a practice of writing letters to a small pine tree in Stockholm,⁵ which I could not visit due to the prevailing pandemic. I wrote the letters to this “substitute” pine in Swedish, and had already finished the practice, feeling there was nothing more to be explored with that particular pine. When I saw the call to the Be-coming Tree event, however, I immediately thought of the pine. “Be-coming Tree,” a collective live art event on Zoom, organized by an artist-led initiative facilitated by Jatun Risba, Danielle Imara, and O Pen Be, defined itself as “a grassroots showcase platform, an open-source art project in the making and a community of artists who create, document and share kin close entanglement with trees” (Be-coming Tree, n.d.b). I had had the opportunity to participate in an earlier event organized by the same project in August 2020. For this new event on October 31, 2020, I decided to experiment with writing a letter to a pine in Kaivopuisto Park. In the program, the performance was described as follows: “Annette Arlander will perform *With a Pine* in Brunnsparcken or Kaivopuisto Park in Helsinki, together with a small pine tree, which she has visited a few times last summer and written letters to as part of her project *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*.”⁶



Video still, *With a Pine II* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

Dearest Pine,

I will try to reach you another time, or if not reach then contact, or at least address you in some manner. Writing letters to trees is, of course, a slightly absurd activity, but on the other hand, it is a traditional, even conventional, strategy used by poets, in the Romantic era especially. I am not a poet, and I am not addressing you in some sort of sudden cosmic euphoria, or imagined dissolution into existence, or immersion in nature or whatever. I only try to find a way of performing with you, together with you, in a reasonably ethical manner. And traditionally tree lovers are speaking “for” trees rather than with trees. Erazim Kohak, an old philosopher I encountered because he was referenced in a recent text by Matthew Hall (2019, 317), has written a text called “Speaking to Trees” (Kohak 1992), and there he is writing in favour of trying to find manners of speaking that are respectful and supporting of peaceful coexistence. Many, many years ago I made some attempts at performing “as” trees, on behalf of trees, in a playful manner, in a series of audio plays or small monologues written and compiled for specific trees. One of the trees in the series *Trees Talk*⁷ was a pine, and it was growing in a park in Kuopio, in the north of Finland. That work was made for ANTI-festival there, but the first talking trees were talking the whole summer [2003] on Harakka Island. I would not do that again, not with you, that is, to try to put words in your mouth and make you into a puppet in a puppet theatre show, as it were. Of course, I could do that, and then hang an MP3 player and earphones on your branches for passers-by to notice. The first attempts were actually made with CD players hidden in plastic boxes at the roots of the trees. Today, the easiest way would be to make a QR code and attach it to your bark and let passers-by use their phones to find your speech on the Internet. But that is appropriation, really. Well, no, it would be OK, and I don’t think you would mind. I am sure you have a broadminded view of such things. But what would be the point? To teach the children playing around here to see you as a living being? That would not necessarily help, because they could just as easily see a teddy bear as a living being. And you are living in a different way, a manner much closer to our way of being alive. So, that was a long explanation for an easy decision, to try to speak *to* you instead of *for* you,

or *as* you. But I am not really speaking to you; I am addressing you in writing, and that makes a difference, I guess. Once, when sitting on a tree trunk up in the north and writing to the dead trunk, I formulated it in something like these words: “I am not writing to you imagining that you could somehow understand English, and I am not leaving this text, on paper, at your roots for you to digest—no, rather, I think that by writing my thoughts or my ‘words to you’ on paper like this, I am forced to articulate them more clearly, and therefore they might be easier for you to discern as well—if not as words directly, then as intentions, or affects, or some form of trans-corporeal vibrations.” The notion trans-corporeality, coined by Stacy Alaimo (2010), does not refer to “vibrations,” but to all the chemical, magnetic, radioactive, or other exchanges that take place between us and that pass between and across all kinds of bodies. We are exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide, of course, but all kinds of other chemicals or waves pass through our bodies without our being able to control but a small part of that. And if we are thus physically connected, perhaps there are other forms of more intangible connections, too?

*

The experience of writing to the pine as part of an online event can be compared with my first attempt at performing online within the same project. In the collective live art event “Be-coming Tree,” held on August 1, 2020, on Zoom, I was practising a yoga pose next to a pine. I performed together with a small pine tree on Harakka Island in a performance that I called “With a Pine on Harakka Shore,” the same little pine I had visited daily during all of July.⁸ That first event was an important challenge, because I had to consider how I could extend my practice of the two-legged tree pose to last for the duration of an hour. I decided on a rhythm of ten breaths of the pose (reaching up with my arms and balancing on my toes) alternating with ten breaths standing relaxed with arms down. I attached my phone to a root on the cliff for the Zoom connection and asked a colleague to stay next to the phone in order to tell me when the performance was over. My main concern was the Internet connection rather than the performance, and I even made the mistake of recording a vertical video image.⁹

Performing the action as part of a collective event was nevertheless empowering in some sense; I have never considered myself a performer and would not expect to hold the attention of a live audience with my minimalist actions. The possibility of “sharing the stage” with other performers with more spectacular performances provided the opportunity to serve as a “bass player” of sorts, maintaining my action as a complement to other actions.¹⁰ The heightened awareness induced by the “live” moment online, and the exhilarating feeling of being in contact with other artists working with trees in different parts of the world, was combined with a focus on accomplishment, something undertaken for others.¹¹ Therefore, the performance was less of a sensitizing and meditative practice done for oneself, producing material for future artworks as a side effect, nor did it really serve as an exercise in attending to the pine, in creating some kind of relationship to the tree.

After that first experience, the second event felt like a much more relaxed endeavour, and I chose to work alone, exiting the image between the letters to check the connection and the video camera. The act of writing a letter to the pine was not physically demanding and maintaining my focus on the pine was relatively easy. The undisclosed content of the letters gave a private dimension to the performance, separate from the act of writing that the online audience could see. This experience of addressing the pine during an online performance can also be compared with my previous experience of writing letters to the same pine in front of the camera as a private exercise to generate material. The main difference was the duration, which varied

depending on the letters and the weather. Because of the fixed duration of the one-hour Zoom performance, the three letters vary in character, and it seems like the awareness of an audience and the heightened “now” of the live event spurred me to concentrate and try to formulate something of interest, although the audience could not see or hear it.

Writing a letter by hand is slower than reading the transcribed text. This asynchrony of the speed of recorded writing and recorded reading led me later to experiment with recorded talking.¹² Although the three letters included in this video essay are unaltered as texts—I have transcribed them as they were written, soon after the performance—reading and recording them as a voice-over to the video essay necessarily transforms them. In this case, they were read almost one and a half years later. The reflective or explanatory commentaries in these sections interpolating the transcribed letters in the present essay were added as extensions and were written much later.

The video essay is based on a compilation of three videos,¹³ with my entering and exiting of the framed image excluded. The first version of the compilation, creating the appearance of one continuous performance, was rather long (54 minutes) and is here abbreviated to include only the beginning of all three letters on video. The recorded letters, however, are included in full, with each letter beginning synchronously with the image, and then assuming a rhythm of its own. The commentaries were added after each letter while the image still depicts the writing of that letter.



Video still, *With a Pine III* (2020). Filmed by Annette Arlander.

Dearest Pine,

How do you feel about the coming winter? Are you “afraid,” whatever that would be in your terms? Are you anticipating it with dread or apprehension? Or is it a welcome time of rest when you can stop working or at least slow your photosynthesis production and hibernate, or at least take it easy. Probably winter means a little different thing to you than to deciduous trees that really drop their leaves and store their chlorophyll in their roots, like the small birch next to you is doing. You keep your needles, so the change is not that dramatic. But you will feel the cold in some manner, that is for sure, and the

increase of moisture in these chilly autumn days. Now, because of climate change, there will probably not be so much snow here in the south by the sea, and the sea will probably not freeze, which will make your winter experience different, too. In the north, where there is lots of snow, it is hard work for pines and spruces to carry the weight of all that snow. And if the snow is wet and heavy, it is even harder. They say that some trees break because of the snow, while others fall or topple over, if the ground is not freezing, keeping their roots tight. Well, you have none of those problems here—I guess heavy storm winds are the most dangerous thing you can anticipate. And there is no protection here on the hill. I wonder how deep you have managed to get with your roots. You are not that high, so probably the wind will not hurt you. . . Or is it the diminishing light that makes the difference? Well, that is what makes the difference for all of us, but for you that really means less energy, less food, less life material. That is the magic with all of you, plants, you can make your own nourishment from water and minerals simply with the power of sunlight. With our solar panels we try to learn from you, but we still have a long way to go. And a world without trees, with food grown synthetically in laboratories, would be a sad world. I am getting cold here, sitting next to you, even though it is only for an hour. So, I really respect your capacity to find a way of living that makes this cold somehow bearable, or perhaps even pleasant for you. But, then again, you have been around for many millions of years longer than humans, so you have had time to learn quite a selection of tricks: how to survive and thrive. I am going to leave you now; I am simply too cold! And I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for being allowed to spend time with you again. I wish you all the best for the coming winter—take care!

Yours, AA

*

In what manner do these letters exemplify PBR or more specifically PAR (performance as research) methodologies (Arlander et al. 2018), and to what extent do they actually “challenge the epistemological assumptions concerning the concept of research?” To use artistic methods to gather data or produce research material is common and fairly easy (Arlander 2017). Whether artistic methods can be used to analyze such data is another question, and in my experience not so easy. Artistic tools like performance can surely “reinvigorate academic conventions” of presenting research results, as this essay hopefully demonstrates. And as I proposed at the beginning, this video essay can also exemplify how the same material can be formed into an artwork or performance, and into a research presentation, with only minor adjustments. More generally, we can ask to what extent imaginative approaches—like addressing trees in writing—can serve as useful research methods. Did I learn something new about pine trees by writing letters to them? Maybe not in this case. Perhaps I rather understood something about writing and especially about letter writing, like the importance of the addressee, the imagined reader or receiver—in this case the pine tree—for the text produced. In this particular project, the most relevant question is nevertheless whether performance practices, such as writing letters to trees next to the trees, can serve as an aid for the public, and for an academic as well as an art audience, to focus their attention on trees, and by extension other beings with whom we share this world.

Afterthoughts

After compiling this video essay, I have written about differences between the experience of a collective online event and a daily performance practice (Arlander 2022a, 237–40), and reflected on ethical problems related to addressing trees in writing (Arlander 2023). I have also made many

new experiments with various pine trees within a new project called *Pondering with Pines* (2022b).¹⁴ I have not, however, come anywhere closer to solving the problem of reciprocity. How could the specific temporality and materiality of the pine tree be foregrounded? Will all attempts at creating an I-You relationship with a pine tree inevitably turn into anthropocentric fantasies? When returning to these letters written during a one-hour performance with the pine, shared with an online audience only as a visual action, I realized the difficulty of estimating the effect of it. Although the chosen pine tree is small, resembling a human scale, and thus fits with me into the same image frame more easily, and although the human is relatively immobile together with the sessile tree, the pine nevertheless easily becomes a backdrop rather than a co-performer in the video. The duration of the performance inevitably follows human rather than vegetal conceptions of time, and the needs of online spectators and performers in various time zones, rather than the time of the pine, regardless of how we understand that.

Considering temporality prompted me to look at the letters preceding this online event. In my previous nine letters to the pine (between March 30 and August 6, 2020), with the camera as the only witness, the duration of writing was “internally” decided. I stopped writing when I was too cold, or whenever the action had run its course. In the live online performance, the exact time and the duration of one hour formed the frame of the event for all other performers and spectators; the letter writing and my relationship with the pine were adjusted to that “outer” decision. Before this event, I had established a kind of friendship with the pine tree, visiting them repeatedly and addressing them in Swedish, anthropomorphizing the tree to some extent. The letters are, for example, describing the broken branch with its pale wound that later was covered with resin, marvelling at the buds and wondering about the relationship between the pine and the small birch growing from the same crevice on the rock. My understanding of the lifeworld of the pine and our relationship developed over time.

In previous letters, I nevertheless repeatedly return to the absurdity of the attempt at addressing the pine: “Am I wrong in writing to you like this? I mean, it does not hurt you, but is it a delusion, an illusion, a silly game that makes me believe that an I-You relationship à la Buber or Levinas could be possible between us”¹⁵ (April 24, 2020; translated by the author). And at times I try to consider the pine’s point of view:

It’s been a while since I was here, and you might not remember me even if you would have noticed me for some reason. If we think rationally, you have no reason to notice me if I don’t try to hurt you or if I’m not a threat, or then the opposite, if I would not somehow favour you or provide something that you would appreciate. That would be the carbon dioxide I secrete in my breathing, and that is in modest amounts, especially since I am not coming near you. However, we don’t have to think rationally, we can play a little, fantasize. I don’t know whether pine trees can fantasize, but if they can remember, they can plan, too. . . . (May 2, 2020; translated by the author)¹⁶

And further:

I realize it is on the verge of lunacy to play together with a pine tree—I could as well have a conversation with a chair or a table—but that is not true! You are a living being, and even if it is possible that the chair and the table are alive as well, you are living in a manner which I can recognize, which is closer to my way of living, after all. (May 2, 2020; translated by the author)¹⁷

What these early letters to the pine and the letters written during the online performance have in common is their character of *ex tempore* performance. They were written on the spot, as an

automatic writing of sorts, and transcribed without censorship. In the online performance, the act of writing as an action was foregrounded because the text, the content of the letters, was never shared. Whether that helped the spectators to focus on the pine tree, as I hoped it would, is questionable. Perhaps adding the letters to the video¹⁸ serves to focus the viewers' attention better. The problem nevertheless remains unresolved: How can communication between a pine tree and a human take place without diminishing the pine to fantasy projections, or then biochemical processes? Can we even imagine a reciprocal conversation or friendship between a pine tree and a human?

Notes

1. See the Be-coming Tree Facebook page (n.d.a), where I first encountered the event: <https://www.facebook.com/becomingtree/>.
2. These quotes come from the original call for papers to this special issue of *Performance Matters*.
3. For comparison, I made a version of this video essay with only the letters included, which could easily be shown as an artwork. See *Letters to a Pine*: <https://vimeo.com/807081797>.
4. The previous letters were written on March 30, April 6, April 17, April 24, May 2, May 23, June 10, June 23, and August 6, 2020. See *The Pine in Brunnsparcken*: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544>.
5. See "The Pine on Hundudden": <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/771644>.
6. The following links were included: Pine Research, <https://meetingswithtrees.com/>, and <https://annetearlander.com/>.
7. See "Talking Trees": <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/62946/159786>.
8. See "July with a Pine": <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-work?work=960090>.
9. The vertical video image was somehow turned sideways in the zoom recording, and the documentation of the collective event had to use still images of my video recording; see the compilation at <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/944410/924/1543>.
10. A brief documentation of the online event that shows the Zoom view of all participants is available on the Research Catalogue page: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544/1524/81>.
11. This was more of an inspiring fantasy than a real connection while performing because I could not see or hear the others, nor even know if the connection was working. This imagined connection to human performers and spectators elsewhere nevertheless took some part of my focus away from the connection to the pine tree next to me.
12. See, for example, the videos in "Talking with the Reclining Pine (in Kaivopuisto Park)" in the same park: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1529168>.
13. See videos on the Research Catalogue page: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/831544/1125/0>.
14. See *Pondering with Pines* blog, <https://ponderingwithpines.com>, and the project archive: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1323410/1589526>.
15. The extract in the original Swedish: "Gör jag fel att skriva till dig på det här sättet? Jag menar, det skadar ju inte dig, men är det en villfarelse, en illusion, en löjlig lek som får mig att inbilla mig att ett jag-du -förhållande à la Buber eller Levinas skulle vara möjligt mellan oss."
16. The extract in the original Swedish: "Det är ett bra tag sedan jag var här sist, så du skulle kanske inte komma ihåg mig, även om du lagt märke till mig av någon anledning. Om vi tänker rationellt så har du ingen orsak att lägga märke till mig ifall jag inte försöker skada dig eller utgör ett hot, eller då det motsatta, att jag på något sätt kunde gynna dig eller bjuda på något som du skulle uppskatta. Det är i så fall den koldioxid jag utsöndrar i min andning, och det är ju blygsamma mängder, i synnerhet som jag inte

kommer nära in på dig. Men vi behöver ju inte tänka rationellt, vi kan leka lite, fantisera. Jag vet ju inte om tallar kan fantisera, eller leka, men om de kan minnas så kan de också planera för framtiden...”

17. The extract in the original Swedish: “Jag inser att det är på gränsen till galenskap att leka tillsammans med en tall—lika gärna kunde jag föra ett samtal med en stol eller ett bord—men det är inte sant! Du är en levande varelse, och även om det är möjligt att stolen och bordet också lever, är du levande på ett sätt som jag kan känna igen, som är närmare mitt sätt att leva, trots allt.”

18. See *Letters to a Pine*: <https://vimeo.com/807081797>.

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