

An aerial photograph of a river valley. A wide, green river flows from the top left towards the bottom right. The surrounding mountains are covered in dense vegetation, appearing in shades of purple, pink, and yellow. The river's path is marked by a dark, winding line.

LIFE, RE-SCALED

**The Biological Imagination
in 21st-Century Literature
and Performance**

**EDITED BY LILIANE CAMPOS
AND PIERRE-LOUIS PATOINE**



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13. Staging Larger Scales and Deep Entanglements

The Choice of Immersion in Four Ecological Performances

Eliane Beaufils

The Gaia hypothesis, formulated in 1974 by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, revealed how different biological scales were involved in climate dynamics. Just as the human body is a holobiont with about as many bacteria as cells of its own, the atmosphere and climate are indebted to the activity of the smallest organisms: cyanobacteria, plankton, and plant respiration. Most theatre continues, however, to support the worldview that was dominant until now in the physical and natural sciences: the perspective centred on autonomous actants or objects. Theatrical reductions even emphasize the separation of elements, be they actors or props. Indeed, if the stage is seen as the world, it is only because each element represents a more general, even universal element: the actor—the prince—power. From a structuralist point of view, the grammar of theatrical representation can only be studied because each actant can be identified and isolated in its own functions.¹ What happens, however, if one wishes to show that each actor interacts with others and is inseparable from a dwelling ensemble,

¹ I am referring to actants as studied by A. J. Greimas or Anne Ubersfeld. Greimas conceived an actantial model of six actants. It is a device that can theoretically be used to analyse any real or thematised action. See Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966).

an ecosystem? One would have to transport a whole environment on stage;² no overview and no control of the interactions would be possible.

One has to consider, furthermore, that the viewer of spectacles can be considered an analogy of the scientific observer. If the twenty-first-century audience is aware of the action of its situated thought on the scientific object, and the impossibility of adopting on Gaia an outlook from Sirius,³ the spectator should also be understood as participating in the reciprocal play of the elements. The Gaia hypothesis, widely confirmed since the 1970s, seems, in truth, to call for a theatre that abandons the pretence of overviews and disrupts the position of the spectator.

This contribution will study experiments moving in this direction. It will look at four set-ups that renounce theatrical frontality in favour of the theatre as medium: Kris Verdonck's *Exote I*, Pierre Huyghe's *After A Life Ahead*, Tobias Rausch's *Die Welt Ohne Uns*, and EdgarundAllan's *Beaming Sahara*. It will analyse how the theatre is converted into a *milieu*, and how the spectators are invited to enter these scenes of the world. This theatre creates biological and geological situations, where the main humans on stage are the spectators. The question is whether it changes the apprehension and representation of biological processes in which we humans are involved. First, I will look at the various 'actors' on stage and study the different scales that are brought into play by their interdependencies. What do these performances gather by presenting nonhuman actants?⁴ I will then explore the contribution of the theatrical gaze from inside.⁵ It would seem that immersion enables

2 Editors' note: The necessity of updating the classic *theatrum mundi* trope is presented as a way of escaping anthropocentrism by Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr and Hannah Simpson in chapter 12. Here it takes another aspect: the 'world as theatre' is not only a way of extending theatre beyond the human, but also of redefining actants as fundamentally relational.

3 Bruno Latour, 'L'Anthropocène et la destruction de l'image du Globe', in *De l'Univers clos au monde infini*, ed. by Emilie Hâche (Paris: Dehors, 2015), pp. 29–56 (p. 42).

4 The verb 'gather' here refers to Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (Winter 2004), 225–48, <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/89-CRITICAL-INQUIRY-GB.pdf>. The French sociologist points out the contemporary pitfalls of critique, and stands for its methodological renewal. Instead of denouncing facts and arguments, he suggests we gather the different meanings and issues we associate with an object, to discuss it anew.

5 The gaze from inside would then be opposed to the point of view from Sirius. This is a way to draw consequences from the philosophical idea that the Gaia hypothesis leads to the rejection of external viewpoints. This rejection has also led

the audience to experience other perceptions and relationalities with nonhumans. Perhaps the spectators can even develop new forms of reading and communication with the other-than-humans. I will suggest the hypothesis that theatre may then become a 'diplomat',⁶ transforming the spectators' inability to think geobiologically into the capacity to do so.

Intermingling Life Forms and Scales

Each of the sets I will now discuss brings together different actors, scales and perceptions, around theatrical situations that can be globally linked to the Anthropocene, the Post-Anthropocene, and the Chthulucene.⁷

In his performative installation *Exote I*, Belgian director Kris Verdonck invites the audience to come and contemplate exotic plants and animals.⁸ The textual part consists in signboards presenting the various specimens that are the protagonists: one can become familiar with their characteristics and regions of origin. The performance seems, however, gratifying: it promises the discovery of exotic fauna and flora in a reduced space with, it seems, interactions. An interactive garden!

On arrival, visitors are asked to put on a suit similar to that of laboratory workers. This already induces a tension with the idea of an astonishing discovery of new species, a discovery always linked to the notions of (scientific) conquest and (geographical) freedom. The various plant and animal species include Asian hornets, green parakeets, American bullfrogs, little trees carrying blue berries, a jungle of bamboo plants, Japanese knot weeds...⁹ These so-called invasive species are spreading

Bruno Latour to entitle one of his lecture-performances *Inside*, thus underlining the epistemological shift of the scientist's position.

6 Baptiste Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant: Enquêtes sur la vie à travers nous* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2020), pp. 245–75.

7 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), especially chapter 2 (pp. 30–57) and chapter 4 (pp. 99–103), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q>.

8 *Exote I* was conceived and directed by Kris Verdonck in 2011, with the support of dramaturgist Marianne Van Kerkhoven. It was produced by Z33 & A Two Dogs Company. The artists worked together with the University of Diepenbeek and the Z33 contemporary art centre in Hasselt (Belgium).

9 Editors' note: This rich environment can be contrasted with the ways in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century theatre struggled with 'the human-inclined materiality of the theatre medium', and the resulting aesthetics analysed by

in the Belgian flora and fauna and eventually represent a threat, not only for other species, but for the balance of the whole biotope. Beauty is here associated with morbidity, as the term 'exote' reveals its two faces: the exotic and the 'exit'.



Fig. 53 *EXOTE* © A Two Dogs Company. Photography © Kristof Vrancken. All rights reserved.

The effectiveness of the performance is due, in particular, to the way it plays with scales: the local disturbances refer to planetary interactions. By constantly teleporting themselves by airplane, humans have brought back species from distant territories. This transport has often been involuntary, humans having forgotten or neglected that they themselves were capable of transporting seeds, germs, or larvae in their bodies, clothes, or suitcases. Ecosystems are now experiencing unintended local-regional-global interdependencies. The spectators may no doubt have difficulties in imagining all the spatial-biological dynamics that converge here.

A sort of temporal vortex is also produced since the performance gathers the results of several decades of tourism and commercial

Shepherd-Barr and Simpson (chapter 12): while writers like Maeterlinck or successors like Beckett tended to empty the stage, *Exote I* stages a world rich with a variety of organisms.



Fig. 54 EXOTE © A Two Dogs Company. Photography © Kristof Vrancken. All rights reserved.

exchanges. It recalls a distant time¹⁰ when a clear distinction could be made between endogenous and exogenous species. It also represents a possible incubator of future devastation. The spectators are thus at a crossroads of temporalities, a position typical of the Anthropocene. They are at the centre of a planetary garden that they themselves have deregulated, situated in a liminal time, a moment when the garden still looks beautiful and accessible, but will soon tip over into a hostile configuration. In this position, it appears necessary to respond to the imbalances with responsible action.

Pierre Huyghe's performative installation *After ALife Ahead* confronted an even broader intersection of scales, commensurate with the size of the installation.¹¹ The French artist used the site of an ice rink

10 Maybe this time is not very ancient. Indeed Arthur Tansley coined the term ecosystem in 1935. As this notion implies a stability, it is possible to look back to this period as one where exogenous factors did not seem to threaten the balance of the planetary ecosystems. On the other hand, South American Indigenous people were devastated by illnesses and bacteria transported by the Spanish conquerors upon arrival in the sixteenth century.

11 *After ALife Ahead* was conceived as a temporary installation for the Skulptur Projekte Münster in 2017. More information is available on the exhibition's website: <https://>

that was to be destroyed as part of the city of Münster's urban planning policy. The building, seen from the outside, seemed to be preserved, but, in the huge hall of the ice rink, the floors were cracked. In front of the stands, a moonscape of varying levels of soil stretched out: bits of concrete floor could be seen on the tops of mounds that rose up between the cracks. The mounds composed of several layers of stones and minerals revealed the various strata of the foundations. Here again, the geological apprehension was doubled by a temporal apprehension: the number of strata referred to the stages of past construction, as well as to the time it took to erode them. In the earthy bottom between the mounds, irregular hollows were drawn, as if dug by bad weather and landslides. At the bottom of some of the furrows, puddles could be seen.¹²

Various hatches in the ceiling allowed water and sunlight to pass through but only occasionally and, it seemed, in a random way. The more water and sunlight were let in, the more life developed in the puddles, and the more the ground shifted. Life also developed in an aquarium containing bacteria and marine animals, and in another container that held cancer cells. Although it could be observed directly, the life of these marine and aquatic organisms was also measured by sensors, designed with oncologists and biologists. As they walked through the entire hall, viewers were free to observe all the elements: in the hollows of the grounds, around the aquarium that was placed in the centre of the space, or along the windows and the old pool.

Even more than *Exote*, *After ALife Ahead* mixed together different temporalities. The past time of the construction was concretely present in the mounds; an even more ancient time emerged in the disturbed soil, reminiscent of that of archaeological sites. The excavated ground also referred concretely to the possible future of the city. In the future, Münster could be gripped by great heat, forcing the population to abandon the buildings and lifestyles inherited from a temperate Europe.¹³ The installation thus extended more concretely than *Exote* towards the

www.skulptur-projekte-archiv.de/en-us/2017/projects/186/.

12 A short video shows the different parts of the installation: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x5r7i6s>

13 Editors' note: This engagement with temporalities beyond the usual span of drama is comparable to the performances analysed by Shepherd-Barr and Simpson in chapter 12, which use extended temporalities to shift the focus of ecological theatre away from the human.

future and towards the past. It might even refer to a post-Anthropocene, a period when humans will no longer be *anthropoï*, or even when they will have disappeared. The ice rink without its heart appeared as an archive of the future, as ruins to come. The installation also extended on larger scales because it made us perceive micro-organisms that we can hardly see ordinarily. Finally, it allowed the audience to experience the interdependence between geological and biological evolutions.

Die Welt ohne Uns, a 'longterm planttheater' developed by Tobias Rausch, also constitutes a post-Anthropocene performance concept which wishes to apprehend the very long term. This expression refers to a cycle of performances and installations, conceived and entitled after Alan Weisman's 2007 book, *The World Without Us*.¹⁴ Although the book was somewhat controversial,¹⁵ the German director's work is based on a cooperation with numerous scientists on the basis of the climate situation in Germany in 2010.¹⁶ Originally, this cooperation was to develop theatrical meetings every three months, with the aim of following the evolution of nature left to itself after the disappearance of humans. The theatre was geographically immersed in the botanical garden of the city and wanted to follow its vegetal rhythm. Only the first five episodes, however, conformed to this initial idea, over a year and a half.

14 The company Lunatiks Production conceived *Die Welt ohne Uns* with the support of the Hannover town theatre. It was originally planned to take place from 2010 to 2015. The project is presented on the website of the company: <https://lunatiks.de/produktion/die-welt-ohne-uns/>.

15 Alan Weisman's book is a very well researched speculation, grounded in numerous interviews with researchers. But the author does not give the readers any really plausible reasons as to why a planetary situation without humans should occur. Such a state would be an ecologically desirable one and suggests somehow that humans would do better by disappearing from Earth.

16 Rausch collaborated with the following scientists from the Leibniz-Universität Hannover: Johannes Böttger, Institut für Landschaftsarchitektur; Hansjörg Küster, Institute for Geobotanical Studies; Henning von Alten, Institut für Gartenbauliche Produktionssysteme; Jutta Papenbrock, Institut für Botanik; Rüdiger Prasse, Institut für Umweltplanun; Michael Rode, Institut für Umweltplanung; Norbert Schitteck, Fakultät für Architektur und Landschaft; Wolfgang Spethmann, Institut für Gartenbauliche Produktionssysteme. He also collaborated with Angela Kallhof, a specialist in plant ethics from the Institute for Philosophy, Vienna; Andreas Ebhardt, from the Schulbiologiezentrum Hannover; Ralf Köneke, from Fachbereich Umwelt und Stadtgrün, Landeshauptstadt Hannover; and Kaspar Klaffke, working for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Gartenkunst und Landschaftskultur.



Fig. 55 The garden party before the withdrawal of humans. *Die Welt ohne Uns*. Directed by Tobias Rausch. © Katrin Ribbe. All rights reserved.

At the first meeting, the spectators met various plants that were staged and assigned a written text. After this sort of festive garden party, the audience retired to a container, filled with seats and equipped with a glass side opening onto the garden. The container was set up as a spectator room detached from the stage, that is, the garden. The audience saw the garden from which human life had withdrawn, with the remains of its activities, and entered into a speculation that was not devoid of mourning. This meditation of places left to themselves after the departure of humans was orchestrated through a voice-over that formed a radio landscape piece (a *Hörspiel*) of sorts.

The fourth and fifth episodes took up this audiophonic formula by matching it with a visual installation embedded in the garden: 'fifteen years after the abandonment by humans', a text related the co-evolution of a corpse and its humus companions inhabiting the installation, and '80 years later', another text told the story of the buildings disembowelled by the vegetation, frequented by some wolves and numerous birds.¹⁷

The two intermediate episodes, corresponding to one and five years after the end of human life, were animated by actors in the garden.

17 The first installation was created by Katrin Riddle, the second one by Mirko Bortsch.



Fig. 56 The view from the container: a garden without humans. *Die Welt ohne Uns.*
Directed by Tobias Rausch © Katrin Ribbe. All rights reserved.



Fig. 57 The view from the container: the garden abandoned. *Die Welt ohne Uns.*
Directed by Tobias Rausch © Katrin Ribbe. All rights reserved.

The actors commented on the reproductive action of the plants, their sexuality, their needs for nutrition and desire for colonization. The growth of the plants and the evolution of the garden was also simulated, artificially produced in collaboration with scientists and gardeners. Compared to *Exote* and *After ALife Ahead*, *Die Welt Ohne Uns* is much more focused on biological rhythms, and therefore on the temporal scales and mechanisms of plant development. It also takes shape in an environment that is changing, and whose changes are a sign of global upheaval. Ultimately, it preserves more familiar theatrical components, as it is based on texts of various kinds, and even on acting.

The last project I will consider takes place inside a theatre. In *Beaming Sahara*,¹⁸ the spectators are invited to come up on the stage plunged in darkness. There they remain for a long time, so as to change their state: indeed, a voice-over invites them to take into account their breathing, position, and imagination. Most of the show will leave the spectators in the dark, except for the moments when landscapes are projected on a screen situated in the middle of the room. The performance is then articulated into four parts, producing a succession of bio-geological encounters that stretch over time, with a certain slowness. First the spectators hear the sound of branches, then they see a lush forest on the screen. Plunged back into darkness, they see a block of soil slowly appear, very dimly lit. This block appears as the body of the forest, the material of which the humans only see the efflorescence and ramifications. The voice-over is both scientific and poetic, letting the forest organism speak in the first person. At the end of its presentation, it mentions the state of crisis in which it finds itself today, before the earth fades from view. We hear sand trickling in the darkness, before seeing on the screen an expanse of soft, hot-coloured desert. The spectators are then shown, in a very weak light, a block of sand, of similar size and shape as the block of earth. The sand's monologue unfolds, succeeded by the stone's and then by that of the ice.

The piece shows the crisis of the Anthropocene through the founding elements of life on Earth. Rather than the Anthropocene, the performance

18 *Beaming Sahara* was first presented by the collective EdgarundAllan on 21 June 2019 in Erlangen (Germany). It is the English version of *Milo, ich hab mich in die Sahara gebeamt*, which premiered in May 2018 in Hildesheim (Germany). See <https://www.edgarundallan.com/beamingsahara>.

is reminiscent of the Chthulucene as defined by Donna Haraway. In fact, it plunges us into a crisis without actors, without direction or defined end, a crisis in which one is immersed. The spectators may feel trapped in a becoming, 'a thick ongoing' present with entangled actants.¹⁹ Forests, minerals, and ice are not perceived as normal actors, and constitute, in truth, hyperactors. Crucially, they are clearly presented as actants, and not objects, not even hyperobjects.²⁰ The spectators are thus no longer immersed in the crisis from the anthropocentric point of view, but from that of these intermingled actants. They are not only immersed in the interdependencies of the Anthropocene but placed in another posture, both literally and figuratively. They are at the same time inside, as in the other theatrical designs presented above, and outside, as in the oblivion of humanist man, listening to 'chthonic' beings.

In this perspective, of the four set-ups I have presented, this one effects the most radical decentering of the human.²¹ The decentering it visibly induces is, at the same time, performative and ideal. The spatial immersion is, however, less intense, as the frame remains theatrical, making the geobiological scales perhaps less perceptible. I will now measure the potentialities of these different forms by analysing more precisely their immersive effects.

Forms of Displacement by Immersion

The most obvious dimension of these performances is immersion: an invitation to apprehend unknown or 'unseen'²² forms of life, extended by performatively divesting the spectators of their intellectual mastery. More than imagination, what is at stake is thus an ideal sensual

19 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 19.

20 This notion has been coined by Timothy Morton and makes clear that humans cannot apprehend ecological issues like other objects because of the multiple elements and dynamics involved in a single ecological phenomenon. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

21 Editors' note: Beaufils's analysis of this challenge to anthropocentrism echoes Shepherd-Barr & Simpson assertion, in chapter 12, that '[d]ecentring, re-scaling, and enmeshing the human figure from and within the micro- and macroscopic scales of the climate crisis is the crucial work of twenty-first-century theatre and performance practice'.

22 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

apprehension. By this means, these set-ups seem to answer the wish of many thinkers of the Anthropocene who consider that we humans are going through a crisis of sensibility.²³ This crisis is coupled with physiocide,²⁴ resulting from a profound lack of knowledge, i.e. a lack of knowledge about the physical world and, in particular, the plant world. Both the crisis of sensibility and the resulting physiocide prevent us from responding adequately to the ecological catastrophe. Promoting a renewed sensitivity with some information would be one of the first steps towards developing an ability-to-respond.²⁵

Exote and *After ALife Ahead* immerse the viewers entirely in environments that have their own mode of functioning. *After ALife Ahead* was also evolving beyond the control of humans, which increased the impression of entering an ecosystem. In both cases, moreover, the sensitivity towards specific entities (plants, animals, bacteria, puddles, cracks, light, or rain traps) goes hand-in-hand with an atmospheric co-experiencing: the spectators share a space, share the air with nonhumans. Such a sensation is fundamental for philosopher Emanuele Coccia, who defines the atmosphere as a sharing of breath amongst the living. Through the atmosphere, he writes, the living are linked together like organs of the same organism, linked by flows of matter and by their breathing. The atmospheric impression accentuates immersion and stimulates the amalgam of 'matter and sensibility', of sensation with the whole being.²⁶

The perception of an atmosphere is also at the foundation of any artistic experience according to Gernot Böhme, because it permeates all the perceptions during this experience.²⁷ It is constitutive of aesthetic

23 Baptiste Morizot and Estelle Zhong Mengual, 'L'illisibilité du paysage. Enquête sur la crise écologique comme crise de la sensibilité', *Nouvelle revue d'esthétique*, 22.2 (2019), 87–96.

24 'Physiocide' means the murder of the vegetal world. See Iain Hamilton Grant, 'Everything Is Primal Germ or Nothing Is: The Deep Field Logic of Nature', *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 19.1 (2015), 106–24.

25 By 'ability-to-respond' I would like to underline the need of a response in 'response-ability', the term coined by Haraway in her book *When Species Meet* (2007), which she later deepened and enlarged in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016).

26 Emanuele Coccia, 'In Open Air: Ontology of the Atmosphere' (chapter 7), *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), pp. 35–53.

27 Gernot Böhme, 'The atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetic', *Journal of Aesthetics*, ed. by Griffero-Somaini, 33.3 (2006), Year XLVI, pp. 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/072551369303600107>.

apprehension because our sensitive being-in-the-world is based on it. The foregrounding of atmosphere thus accentuates the spectators' impression of being exposed to the ecoworld, their affects and their comprehension of their permeability to ecosystems. Finally, an 'ambiance', an affective tone, infuses the atmosphere of the installations: that of threat, linked to the fragility of the living and especially of the vulnerable balance. It can go as far as mourning within the ruined buildings and lands of *After ALife Ahead* or the becoming rock or sand in *Beaming Sahara*. All these affects contribute to the impression that we humans are arriving at a threshold: we are living in a liminal situation. We are potentially at the beginning of something. The sensitive and performative emergence of the artistic situation holds a metaphorical significance. In the four performances, the liminality is combined with anxiety or mourning, so that the performances could even give rise to solastalgia, this specific feeling anticipating the death of life on our planet and the mourning of the world as we know it.

The sensory immersion is less likely to overwhelm the spectators in Tobias Rausch and EdgarundAllan's performative spaces, but it is no less permanent. The two immersive forms are each of different interest. In *Beaming Sahara*, concentrating on small pieces of matter in the middle of the darkness focuses the attention towards earth, sand, or ice. The sounds of branches, the wind, the trickling of sand occur in the darkness, between the spectators, without them being able to determine their origin or location. At the same time, smells of dead branches, wet ground, dusty stones, or snow are propagated. This show thus calls upon all kinds of stimuli, so that the spectators are truly immersed in a situation that they cannot anticipate. The director aims at producing 'an atmospheric synaesthesia' similar to what she herself experienced at the Klimahaus 8° Ost in Bremerhaven.²⁸

Here, again, the performative dimension converges with an idea, namely the Latourian leitmotiv mentioned in the introduction, according to which humans must realize that their panoramic perspectives or views from above (above or outside nature-culture) are not tenable.

28 She wrote the story of the project in her master thesis, which she kindly allowed me to read. I thank her for sending me her thesis. The 'Klimahaus 8° Ost in Bremerhaven' is an experimental ecological museum, that enables visitors to plunge into ecosystems and to apprehend the significance of their changes.

On the contrary, every human is deeply included in the interplay of biological materials and dynamics. As the interplay far exceeds individual mastery, it may generate an impression of crisis. On stage, darkness can even produce the effect of a performative encirclement and accentuate this impression. But as Butler states, one is always already in crisis when one realizes it.²⁹

Rausch's conceptualized performances, on the contrary, could lead one to believe that there is no immersion that endures, since the spectators of the 'longterm planttheater' are reduced to staying in a container from the end of the first episode. This container position in the middle of a botanical garden nevertheless promotes a paradoxical impression. On the one hand, nostalgia of contact with the living nonhuman beings arises, and feeds an anticipated mourning that is the other side of desire. On the other hand, the theatre appears as a constructed situation, highly artificial and inverted. It is a very improbable thought experiment, which eventually echoes science fiction scenarios where humans are unwillingly exiled from Earth. In a certain way, through the accentuated separation from the garden, the effective immersion with the nonhuman is more keenly felt: the spectators become aware of how neglected, or even forgotten, this immersion is in everyday life. This awareness draws attention towards the living beings we do not know, we do not even feel, despite the fact that they live with us. One could even point out a metaphorical significance: does the incapacity to remain in the garden not echo the Biblical experience of Adam and Eve expelled from Eden? Does the garden not appear as a sort of Paradise, at least in the first episodes?

In the four performances, the spectators are finally immersed in a setting: an artistic setting with a metaphorical dimension, which feeds the impression of topicality, even of urgency. The spectators are placed in a position to share the evolution of living or non-living others, to test their co-existence. If the impression is particularly accentuated in the installations where there is no human presence to disturb the sensitive sharing, the four performances nurture, through immersion, the sensation of a 'becoming-with' (Haraway). The becoming-with is even palpable in *After ALife Ahead* and in *Beaming Sahara*, because the

29 Judith Butler, 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', *Transversal* (May 2001), <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/butler/en>.

spectators can touch the ground, the soil, the puddles; in *Beaming Sahara* they are invited to do so: to knead some soil, to stroke sand, to put their hand in the water of the melted ice.



Fig. 58 A piece of forest. *Beaming Sahara*. Performed and directed by EdgarundAllan collective. ©edgar&allan. All rights reserved.



Fig. 59 Watering a piece of forest. *Beaming Sahara*. Performed and directed by EdgarundAllan collective. ©Julia von der Maur. All rights reserved.



Fig. 60 Crossing deserts, past and future: spectators caressing sand in *Beaming Sahara*. Performed and directed by EdgarundAllan collective. ©edgar&allan. All rights reserved.

The impression of becoming-with is perhaps accompanied by a certain powerlessness. Spectators become aware of the vulnerability of the living or mineral elements. They may experience inside the theatre a critical zone, that is a 'double' (Artaud) of the critical zone defined by biologists, this thin ribbon of life surrounding Earth which is only a few kilometres thick. The critical zone in which humans are immersed reveals itself to be a doubly, triply critical one. It is strategic, threatened, and threatening. Could such a revelation be incapacitating?

The fact is that increasing our sensitive capacities towards living beings and our interdependencies is probably not enough to develop *response-ability* towards the ecological crisis. A deep and entangled ecology can indeed be dark in more than one sense, as Timothy Morton writes in his eponymous book: deep ecology is difficult to grasp and potentially threatening. The call to mourn in Huyghe's and Rausch's work may not be empowering either. Certainly, many thinkers believe that it is necessary to mourn, but the grieving process can scarcely be accomplished in the course of a performance. The paralysis of mourning is *a fortiori* unlikely to be overcome in such a limited time span.

Reading Signs

But it seems to me that here the very obscurity of the nonhuman living, inherent to the performative immersive situations, is able to stir up the ability to respond. By relying on sensitive and atmospheric affection, the performances call for an attention that is also a *vital curiosity*. Unless the spectators of the four performances want to stay out of the game of the elements, they feel the materials and the influences exerted on each other or on themselves. They wonder where life is in the installations or on the stages, where the movements of life are. If the earth is dimly lit in *Beaming Sahara*, it is also because it is difficult to illuminate with the light of understanding; it is teeming with a thousand lives and possibilities. Viewers may realize that they have to concentrate to see it. Such illegibility arouses the curiosity to know *how it works*, *how I can get to it*, and *what is my relation to it*. It is impossible to remain dazzled by the actions of nature, as we face them with wonder, as Martyn Evans defines it:

The attitude of wonder is thus one of altered, compellingly-intensified attention to something that we immediately acknowledge as somehow important—something that might be unexpected, that in its fullest sense we certainly do not yet understand, and towards which we will likely want to turn our faculty of understanding; something whose initial appearance to us engages our imagination before our understanding; something at that moment larger and more significant than ourselves; something in the face of which we momentarily set aside our own concerns (and even our self-conscious awareness, in the most powerful instances).³⁰

If those four performances trigger a ‘sense of wonder’, then it is one that stirs up an imagination oriented towards something important, and that impels a search for what matters. The spectators are on the lookout for a bubble of air, for a movement of life. A puddle seems to contain larvae and small algae. One floor is cracked, another is teeming with mini-organisms. These various signs are not linguistic, they constitute indices in the Piercian terminology.³¹ These bio-theatres invite us to read signs,

30 Martyn Evans, ‘Wonder and the Clinical Encounter’, *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 33.2 (February 2012), 123–36 (p. 123), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11017-012-9214-4>.

31 Charles Pierce distinguishes three kinds of signs: icons, which establish a relation of resemblance with the objects they replace; indices, which have a metonymic

calling the spectators to be researchers, photographers, or hunters. Although they are not completely intelligible, these signs are eloquent, they translate a situation, the presence of a being, or relations. They are both performative and meaningful. The reading of signs confirms Donna Haraway's hypothesis according to which there is a 'sensual communication'³² with the nonhuman, as well as a 'material semiotics'.³³

According to philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, who studies the dialectics of the unseen in art and daily life, 'each mode of phenomenality is [furthermore] constitutive of a world of meaning and, therefore, calls for certain intersubjective parallels'. As in paintings, 'the visible [in the performances] is liberated from vision at the moment when it seizes its own invisibility'.³⁴ The spectators may be the ones who 'liberate visibility' and who develop the power to communicate. They may let the desire for the objects arise from the objects themselves, especially as they are revealed not to be objects, but rather subjects.

Therefore, the encounters and movements within these performances seem to feed complex experiences and thoughts, which are simultaneously sensitive, intuitive, imaginative, and reflexive. The human who leads this sensitive, intuitive, and reflexive research shows response-ability, but a paradoxical ability. He or she views the living without purpose or assurance. His or her plunge into the darkness of the living is marked by a kind of active passivity, going hand in hand with forgetfulness of former worlds of meaning and perceiving. This plunge paves the way towards another thinking, a slight transformation that can be called an involution. It allows, perhaps, to veer even further away from human sense and thought habits insofar as, strictly speaking, it is not undertaken in the search for agency and knowledge. The spectators scrutinize the nonhuman actants, their interrelatedness, and then become aware of their interdependence with themselves, a generic or

relation with the replaced objects; and symbols, which are linked by convention or in an arbitrary way (linguistic, gestural, or visual) with the signified objects. See Charles Pierce, *Semiotics and Significs* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977).

32 Donna Haraway, *Conference at the Evergreen College* (Olympia, WA: Evergreen State College Productions, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWQ2JYFwJWU>.

33 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 21.

34 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 19.

particular human self. This is spontaneous and/or interested thinking, which is not narcissistic nor egotistical.

This attitude of thoughtful perception is promoted by the regular movement of the spectators. For it is not possible to stay in place in the three most immersive situations. In both installations *After ALife Ahead* and *Die Welt Ohne Uns* and during *Beaming Sahara*, one has to move in any case. Thought cannot remain in the assurance of what it thinks, because perception cannot.

Such a constant displacement of thinking corresponds to what philosophers Judith Butler and Jean Luc Nancy, albeit in very different frameworks, both call critical thinking: a thinking 'put in crisis',³⁵ resulting from a 'state of ontological suspension'.³⁶ This may promote a slight powerlessness in the spectators. My hypothesis is that this powerlessness overlaps with a form of power.

The Place of the Spectator

Immersion is paradoxically accompanied by the feeling of not quite knowing anymore *where one is*—a question which also inspires the latest work of Bruno Latour.³⁷ Asking *where life is, how it is going*, certainly echoes the need to develop one's own vital competence and to know where one is. But the performances do not really answer the question, which is left to the audience to resolve. The metaphorical place of humans in the designed environments would rather be disappointing if one looks for an answer: dead humans or non-anthropoi in Huyghe's and Rausch's work; scientists dressed in laboratory clothes in Verdonck's work, or travellers fond of discoveries and responsible for the dissemination of larvae and seeds; spectators plunged into the dark and without any hold on the performed activity in EdgarundAllan's work. Needless to say, these positions do not appear to be very satisfying if one asks how to be on Earth.

35 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Critique, Crise, Cri', *Diakritik* (2016), https://www.fabula.org/actualites/critique-crise-cris-par-j-l-nancy_75144.php.

36 Butler, 'What is Critique'.

37 Bruno Latour, *Où suis-je ? Leçons du confinement à l'usage des terrestres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021).

The four set-ups thus question the place of the spectators/humans. The need to move performatively, to read, or to understand combines with the need to speculatively question one's position as a spectator and as a human. As the spectator cannot completely 'access' the surrounding biological or abiotic entities, rifts remain, all the stronger as proximity develops. We can make the hypothesis, nevertheless, that these divisions favour speculation. Indeed, it is because the spectators cannot project themselves directly into the behaviour of the plants in *Die Welt Ohne Uns* that they feel the inadequacy of the anthropocentric terms used by the actors (sexuality, attraction, colonization). They then weave together another representation of plant behaviours—without words or 'between words'. They feel empathy for the basilisk placed in the microwave (Rausch), and possibly for the invasive species involuntarily responsible for the imbalances (Verdonck), but it is an empathy that is at the same time sensitive, distanced, and failing, promoted by the representations they have at their disposal.

In the same way, the multiplication of perspectives by the means of texts or of the actors and images, stirs up reflection. This is notably the case in the installations accompanied by acousmatic voices,³⁸ in some episodes of *Die Welt Ohne Uns* and *Beaming Sahara*. Moreover, the text of *Beaming Sahara* is not limpid. It is not micro-organisms that speak, which would associate them with subjects and thus make the theatre a well-known ventriloquist practice. Through a small block of soil, we discover that it is the forest that speaks. But the forest is neither visible nor completely imaginable as such:

Moisture and warmth, where life is baked

What appears to you as the accumulation of thousands of interlocked beings, falling, crawling and creeping, is in reality one organism [...]

the power that flows through me is viscous and dark [...]

it pushes itself reliably into each of my tips, I am full of energy up to the top, it drips from the tips of the leaves, lines up ring around ring and piles up into trunks and columns of warmth and resistance. Further up, it networks, branches out into ever denser structures that pulsate,

38 By acousmatic voices I mean voices without bodies and without any possible localisation.

continue to grow and emerge. Every centimetre is filled with incessant movement. [...]

I can endure many things, I always start to sprout anew;

lately however it becomes lonely in me.

My feelings contract, everything that is dear to me turns inward,

what is happening on my surface? The lines of communication are broken, I no longer function reliably.

My juices flow viscously.³⁹

The acousmatic texts of these installations are both informative ('What appears to you is [...] one organism') and poetic ('I start to sprout anew', 'it becomes lonely in me'). They give signs and make the other-than-human speak. But the very language of the 'forest' is displayed as artifice, replacing a nonhuman non-language. It raises the question of how to hear the forest, and how to read it: plunging us into the necessity and the difficulty of what Haraway calls a 'sensual communication' and 'material semiotics'. Many texts in Rausch's and EdgarundAllan's performances thus challenge the spectators by delivering to them the missing signs and languages, while asking the question of how to make 'nature' speak. How can we hear and interact with it? This *mise en abyme* mixes the power of poetic language and the impotence of the spectators and humans. The very notion of a 'subject' becomes again a complex question.

39 'Feuchtigkeit und Wärme, darin wird Leben gebacken, was dir wie die Ansammlung tausender ineinander verschachtelter Wesen, neben und übereinander fallender wuchender krabbelnder und kriechender wesen erscheint ist in wirklichkeit ein organismus./die kraft die durch mich fließt ist zähflüssig und dunkel [...]/zuverlässig schiebt sie sich in jede meiner spitzen, ich bin bis oben voll von energie, sie träufelt von den Blätterspitzen, reiht sich ring um ring umeinander und türmt sich zu Stämmen und Säulen aus Wärme und Widerstandskraft. Weiter oben vernetzt, verästelt sie sich zu immer dichteren Strukturen, die pulsieren, weiter wachsen und entstehen./Jeder Zentimeter ist aufgefüllt mit unaufhörlicher Bewegung.[...]/Ich kann vieles über mich ergehen lassen, immer fange ich von neuem zu spriessen an/ In letzter Zeit jedoch wird es einsam in mir/Meine Fühler ziehen sich zusammen, alles was mir teuer ist wendet sich nach innen,/was geschieht an meiner Oberfläche? die Kommunikationswege sind zerrissen, ich funktioniere nicht mehr zuverlässig/ zähflüssig fließen meine Säfte' (minutes 15'41 to 19'56). The text was translated for the English presentation in Hildesheim (Germany) in May 2018.

The hyperactors who speak are, in truth, ecological subjects, as Stéphanie Posthumus defines them: 'the ecological subject [...] is constructed as a set of relationships and interactions rather than as an individual and isolated entity'.⁴⁰ They speak as ecological hyper-characters and address the audience as ecological subjects. The lack of power of the spectators is thus coupled with a lack of adequate subjectification, and a lack of language. The foreign languages of the earth or the stones are only sketched out.

A Diplomatic Theatre

The theatre could thus be what Baptiste Morizot calls 'diplomatic'. According to Morizot, the relationship of humans with animals and plants would rapidly improve through increased, desired, and fertile interdependencies, if there were more diplomatic humans. These diplomats would be Janus-faced people, one face turned toward nonhumans, one face turned toward humans and their institutions.⁴¹ The theatre presented here often has such a double face, on the one hand, a staging turned towards the nonhuman, on the other, an address to the human. Its poetic language, shot through with unseen connections and *rapprochements*, is also endowed with a two-faced dimension: human imagination and signs meet nonhuman representations. Like the diplomat, these bio-theatres furthermore immerse us in interdependencies, they 'activate the creation of a new configuration of desire' and create 'communities of importance': communities that matter.⁴² Through sensitive encounters, reading signs, and listening to ecopoetic texts, they increase our understanding of nonhumans in ways that are not solely cognitive. The spectators must abandon the point of view of the observer and the experimenter in the laboratory. Moreover, the photographs taken and projected by the members of the EdgarundAllan collective are often the result of trips to neighbouring

40 Stéphanie Posthumus, 'Écocritique et *ecocriticism*. Repenser le personnage écologique', in *La pensée écologique et l'espace imaginaire*, ed. by Sylvain David and Mirella Vadean (Montreal: Université du Québec à Montréal, 2014) pp. 15–33 (p. 15).

41 Baptiste Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant: Enquêtes sur la vie à travers nous* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2020), pp. 254–56.

42 Ibid., p. 256.

territories (the mountains of the Harz, for instance) and illustrate the encounter that is the basis of interdependence.

Finally, the poetic monologues by Rausch and EdgarundAllan open up even more widely the spectrum of possibilities. Indeed, in their works, each entity or actant is the fruit of interrelations, it is in inter- and intra-action with an infinity of others, when it is not itself, like the forest, a gigantic compound of interactions and organisms. The focus on interrelations contributes to making the world, it has a cosmogonic action.⁴³ Therefore, it seems that each poetic monologue could be continued and complexified by multiplying the relational perspectives that form the basis of any identity. Is it necessary to use language to invent other relations and to continue to change the world in a more conscious way? In any case, the poem makes it possible, it is a creative and stimulating diplomat.

This does not prevent the participants, human and nonhuman, from being anchored in the crisis. From this point of view, the works of Rausch and of EdgarundAllan are emblematic of the Chthulucene. They do not only show the Anthropocene, but constitute the first responses with knowledge of the crisis: this is precisely how Donna Haraway conceives the Chthulucene. It is the era that reacts to the Anthropocene, a difficult era, based on the interweaving of actions and lives that must be taken into account and developed in order to survive: for example, to take action for soil management, to keep it humid and teeming with life, paves the way for forests and prevents the expansion of sand or rock deserts. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the two performances that take the form of installations, accompanied by acousmatic voices, focus on soils and forests. The poetic monologues thus promote an empathy with 'chthonic' organisms, as essential as they are obscure. Plunged into the dark or into the container, humans are performatively associated with a dark, almost buried state, away from the light and glitter of epic human heroes. They are invited to act as chthonic creatures. This goes beyond the promotion of biological imagination, biological narrative, or cognitive explanation. Such forms of thought would contribute to a distant attitude and would run the risk of reinforcing human assurance of representation. The spectators here cannot stage internally what they

43 Coccia, *The Life of Plants*, notably in chapter 1, 'On Plants, or the Origin of Our World'.

think, they are plunged into and jostled by the other-than-human, they must test it, cross it, and untangle the threads.

The four performances discussed here enable a new biological, atmospheric, and relational apprehension of the living. They not only immerse the spectators in complex ecosystems where many actants intermingle, they behave similarly to the Anthropocene by 'compressing space' and 'accelerating time'.⁴⁴ Moreover, they invite us to read unseen signs and to communicate with matter, sometimes by touching it. They even lead to a kind of thinking intertwined with its objects: a metaphysical interdependence, which accepts the darkness as a condition of thought. It is thus in multiple ways that bio-theatres can not only be responses to catastrophe, but also stimulate responses to it. The spectators' thoughts can then extend to an ontological, cosmogonic, and perhaps diplomatic pragmatics.

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