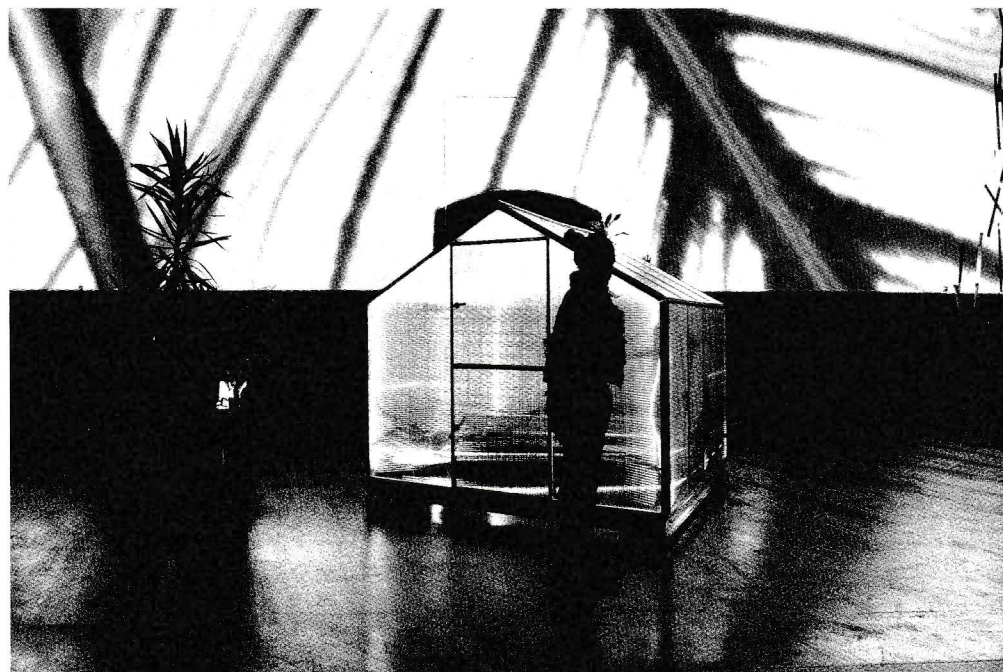


FOR A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF THEATRE



This essay is a reflection on the ecological potential of artistic performances developed and performed in a time of ecological crises. By discussing two recent performances – *Climatic Dances* by Amanda Piña and *To See Climate (Change)* by René Alejandro Huari Mateus in co-authorship with Romuald Krężel – the author discloses the ecocritical dimension of these works and at the same time points out how the performing arts are entangled with the growth/productivist ideology upon which the capitalist economy with its ecological unconscious is based. If artistic work is to become more ecological, this implies more sustainable modes of working.

René Alejandro Huari Mateus in/and
Romuald Krężel, *Videti (spremembe)
podnebja/To See Climate (Change)*,
Mousonturm Frankfurt, 2022.
Foto/Photo: Monica Duncan

This essay explores the question of what the future of theatre and performance could be in the context of ecological disasters or, to put it more accurately, what the performing arts and the sciences dealing with them can do in the face of the ecological crisis. Dorothea Von Hantelmann writes that perhaps a good starting point for addressing these questions would be a deeper understanding of how the arts are intimately intertwined with the “productivist and materialist mind-set that caused and continues to cause this crisis.”¹ I agree with her, and yet I also believe that makers in the performing arts are particularly experienced in constructing and sensing lines of flight and that artistic initiatives can therefore also be catalysts for change. If that is so, what is the ecocritical potential of the performing arts? Can performative, artistic practices become ecological? And what would that mean? By now there are numerous responses to these questions – in the form of embodied experiments, artistic propositions and theoretical argumentations. I propose to revisit some of them.

MOVEMENTS IN THE DARK

The performance begins. For minutes nothing is happening, I only hear a permanent yawning, which conveys a sense of disengagement. Are the performers lying on the dark stage with their faces

covered by houseplants, yawning, or is the yawning recorded? Is it an attempt by the two choreographers – René Alejandro Huari Mateus and Romuald Krężel – to irritate the dispositif of theatre, which has traditionally excluded nature, by contaminating it, as it were, with tamed or domesticated nature? Is it an attempt to divert attention from the speaking, moving and interacting subjects? At the back of the stage there is a structure made of neon tubes that seems to have collapsed, and on the left side there is a greenhouse. Eventually, a performer starts talking to the plant in front of him. The tone of his voice and the way he addresses the plant are reminiscent of a conversation between lovers. I am describing the beginning of the performance *To See Climate (Change)* (which premiered in September 2021 at the Kaserne Basel and was performed again in a modified version on July 1, 2022 at the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt am Main).² In one scene, the performers lie head to head on the floor and tell each other what *Kalanchoe Pinnata* told them: “I spoke to the airplant and they told me to dance with my dying parts.” The movements of the performers can often only be guessed at in the semi-darkness; they are not highlighted by spotlights. The performance deals with the ambivalent relationship between humans and those non-humans that often populate one’s own household and, as

1 Dorothea von Hantelmann and Jessica Morgan (ed.), *Resource Hungry: Our Cultured Landscape and Its Ecological Impact*, London: Koenig Books, 2020, p.134.

2 At the Kaserne Basel the performance was shown as part of the Treibstoff Theatertage Festival. In my description I refer to the performance in Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in Frankfurt am Main.

natural-cultural hybrids, do not correspond to the stereotype of a wild nature at all: houseplants. In a way, Huari Mateus and Krężel stage the impossible by speculatively inviting houseplants to co-choreograph the performance.

TIME ECOLOGIES

Carl Lavery, editor of the book *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*³ believes that the potential of theatre in the time of ecological crises is neither to make the audience aware of this crisis, nor is it to inform the spectators about specific phenomena, to represent them or to use performances to bring about a change in behaviour. He refers to Elinor Fuchs and Bonnie Marranca, who wrote that the ecological contribution of theatre does not consist in any explicit ecocritical message, but is rather to be found in the possibilities that theatre offers as a medium.⁴

Lavery considers the creation of other temporal experiences, which break with the regime of historicity established in modernity and which undermine the rhythms prevailing in late capitalism to be the ecocritical potential of theatre.⁵ He is not concerned with praising slowness *per se*, but rather with producing and experiencing alternative ecologies of time, with a theatre that operates with multiple and interlocking temporalities and rhythms and establishes heterochronies. He writes: "How can the artwork offer a performative critique of the temporal models that have not only produced global warming but are also increasingly unable to respond, in any effective way, to the temporal weirding that it has given rise to?"⁶

Neoliberally structured and increasingly digital work and life practices have reconfigured the human body's sense of time and accustomed it to permanent pace, availability, and output. Only by minimizing time for care – for children, the elderly, persons with special needs and non-humans – can maximum self-optimization be ensured. What can embodied practices that undermine an appropriating logic of anthropocentric and egocentric time control look like?⁷ Lavery writes, with regard to time management in economically powerful nations in Europe and the US: "In the West, this drive to control or manage time has largely manifested itself through a performative nexus that links metaphysics, technology and economics. The result of this enframing has not only been to simplify, dangerously, our conceptual understanding of time, but to divorce us from a whole series of variegated temporalities (biological, planetary, seasonal, indigenous) that refuse to comply with linear notions of time and progress, and which persistently evade our attempts to manage them."⁸

In the performance *To See Climate (Change)*, the prolonged yawning is evoking the temporality of snoozing. Perhaps it is a vegetal time that the artists attempt to approximate? Unlike the temporality that is established during the performance, that of the artistic working process is usually characterized by the restlessness that a production and premiere oriented rhythm – and the simultaneity of engagements that are required to maintain this rhythm – entail. For the first time

in their careers, the choreographers Huari Mateus and Krężel were able to engage in a long artistic research process⁹ that preceded the presentation of the performance *To See Climate (Change)*. In part this was possible due to the artists' active attempts to realize a prolonged research process, but above all, this was possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic that made public live presentations and the simultaneous advancement of various projects almost impossible, thus upsetting the conventional rhythm prevalent in the performing arts.

THE ECOLOGICAL IS PERSONAL

In connection with the ecological crisis, I can currently observe a repoliticization – a sort of new edition of "The personal is political" – but with the opposite thrust. "The personal is political" was the slogan of the student and feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s that became a motto of numerous – especially female – artists at the time. Today, and that means after years of globalization and ecocide, the motto is rather "The private is political because it is part of the planetary," or, "The ecological is political because it is personal." In the 1960s and 1970s, people recognized the political dimension of the personal, which led to a dissolution of the boundaries between art and life. Today, private decisions again become political issues: who buys a car and which one? Who eats meat? Who is flying where? To what temperature is one's apartment heated? etc. And now, too, a further blurring of art and life can increasingly be observed. This can be seen, for example, in the numerous current initiatives of artists who are moving to the countryside and attempting to collectively invent more sustainable forms of living and working there (e.g. the housing and cultivation project initiated by film maker Lola Randl in Gerswalde in the Uckermark in Brandenburg¹⁰). It can also be recognized in the establishment of alternative collective learning sites that are intended to foster a more careful relationship with the local ecology (such as the Floating University in Berlin¹¹ or MASSIA in Estonia¹²).

9 The research process preceding the performance *To See Climate (Change)* took place during a residency in Frankfurt LAB, a residency in Hellerau in Dresden (*Artist-in-Garden-Residence: Environment*), a residency at the Biennale Warszawa and a *#TakeCare Residency* in Hellerau in Dresden.

10 In 2010, Randl and her husband bought an old castle nursery in Gerswalde (Germany), a village with 1500 inhabitants. There Randl and several friends initiated a collective cultivation and housing project. In 2019 an auto-fiction documentary about the project with the title *Von Blumen und Bienen* (On flowers and bees) was shown in cinema (in Germany), in 2020 the film was broadcast on Arte (with the title *Der große Garten* (The Big Garden)). The film is based on Randl's book with the same title.

11 The Floating University Berlin: A NatureCulture learning site, is located in a polluted rainwater basin at former Tempelhof airport in Berlin. Meanwhile inhabited by animals, plants, people and algae, the rainwater collection basin was re-opened in 2018 after raumlaborberlin (a group of architects that worked at the intersection of architecture, city planning and artistic intervention) had discovered it. In the same year raumlaborberlin initiated the Floating University as a place for learning how to engage with the complex entanglements of human and more-than-human worlds in an attempt to construct an alternative trajectory of urban development. See: <https://floating-berlin.org/> (last accessed 19 Oct 2022).

12 MASSIA is a residency space for artists, practitioners, scientists and activists who want to practice in alliance with more than human worlds. It is located in a former school building in Massiaru, a village in the southwest of Estonia. A herb garden (Massia Officinale) of two hectares in size, a herb laboratory and a communal apothecary are part of the complex and provide alternative research sites. MASSIA hosts anyone who wants to study, conduct research or create/write in the intersecting fields of art, ecology, environmental studies, plant and common

3 Carl Lavery, *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*, London/New York: Routledge, 2018.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 1. Such an approach differs from much extant work in Theatre and Performance Studies that tends either to advocate for a direct intervention into ecological and environmental matters and/or makes largely positive – perhaps even hyperbolic – claims for theatre's capacity to bring about behaviour change, more often than not, through some ecstatic or enchanted immersion in environment or nature.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

If in the 1960s and 1970s there was a growing awareness that private problems had to be related to political injustices, today people realise that planetary problems manifest themselves in the private and are co-produced by personal practices. However, the changes and damage caused by the ecological crises are very unevenly distributed geographically and spare those who have contributed most to climate change and habitat destruction. The reference to the private infused with the political is not enough in an era of climate catastrophes and extractive capitalism. Capitalist corporate culture driven by growth ideology, industrialised agriculture, and the resource-devouring arms industry bear primary responsibility for the ecological crisis. At the moment every change counts, even that induced by a single person, nevertheless the focus on individual responsibility must not obscure the systemic cause of the ecological crisis and, in a liberal humanist manner, lead to a privatisation of responsibility (and risks).

The ecological is ultimately also the most intimate, one's own body and wellbeing. "Ecology is about intimacy," Timothy Morton states and adds: "To a great extent others are us." By these others, Morton does not mean our fellow humans. In his posthuman reformulation of Arthur Rimbaud's statement ("Je est un autre" (I is another)),¹³ the others are the non-human beings, things, and hyperobjects that inhabit or permeate the human body. Morton's hyperobjects (global warming, radioactive pollution, oil fields, garbage, or the like) are characterised precisely by the fact that they can no longer be considered an outside of the human body. They adhere to the body or the body moves in them.¹⁴ This perspective shifts our perception towards entanglements, or to what Karen Barad calls intra-actions¹⁵ of humans and non-humans.

CLIMATIC DANCES

In its first part, the performance *Climatic Dances*¹⁶ by choreographer Amanda Piña addresses both the level of the private and the systemic/ecological/economic/political. At first *Climatic Dances* is the staging of a direct indictment of extractivist, capitalist corporations – with reference to very personal experiences. Directly addressing the audience, Piña who is based in Vienna but has Chilean-Mexican roots, talks about her homeland in Chile, where the mining company Anglo-American – specialised in the extraction of copper, lithium and manganese – is gradually destroying the mountain on which she grew up.¹⁷ Piña's body does not move in the dark, she emphasises the focus on her subjectivity by talking about her home and her mother. "This is not an artistic text," she says, "it is personal."¹⁸ At the same time, however, Piña draws the attention away from her person. She says: "If you are a critic in the audience today, don't write about me, write

about this!" Her movements, as well as those of the two co-performers, do not take place in semi-darkness, but they are superimposed by a stone landscape projected onto them, which makes their individual bodies almost disappear. On the one hand, *Climatic Dances* is the staging of the choreographer's subjective consternation in the face of overexploitation in Chile. On the other hand, the last part of the performance is the quotation of a dance of another culture, in which mountains are also considered "earth-beings" and thus part of the collective.

*"Our ghosts are the traces
of more-than-human
histories through which ecologies
are made and unmade."*¹⁹

The indigenous Masewal people based in the Sierra Norte of the Mexican state of Puebla have their own dance tradition. For the Masewal, all dancers embody ghosts – not immaterial spirits, but ghosts from nature.²⁰ Dancing, for them, as the anthropologist Alessandro Questa²¹ describes it in an interview with Piña, means to create, give and invent bodies for invisible bodies. In dance, the mountain body, the rain body, etc. can manifest, thus, the traditional dances of the Masewal can be seen as social technologies that visualise cosmopolitan concepts. According to Questa's interpretation, the dances of the Masewal are apparatuses for visualising the mutual dependencies of the "earth-beings." Questa, who has himself lived and danced with the Masewal, therefore claims that the Masewal have no religion, but an ecology. The Masewal have never lived *in* nature, but have understood it as part of the collective. Their dances, of course, were not developed for theatre; they are danced in communities. Piña exhibits this practice in the theatre by performing one of these dances in *Climatic Dances* in the context of the black box. She considers the dancing of this dance as a practice of decolonizing the Western body (steeped in colonialism, modernity, and ecocide).

In *Climatic Dances*, one can certainly feel how the practices of the global players in the mining business have an impact on the most private issues of singular persons. So far this observation, however, focuses on the level of the performance. If the question is: is Piña's artistic practice an ecological one?, then the working process, the system that brings the latter along and the afterlife of the performance must necessarily be taken into account as well. In this respect, I disagree with Lavery when he claims: "The more effective approach is simply to allow the work to operate autonomously,

19 Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. G1.

20 Cf. *Montañas en resistencia* (Mountains in Resistance) – a series of lectures and online conversations exploring the possibilities and intersections between art, activism and academic research, aiming at recognising mountains as living bodies active in the reproduction of water. (The series was initiated by Amanda Piña in the frame of the fifth volume of her research on Endangered Human Movements and was coordinated by Alessandro Questa. It was realized within the framework of Third Talks of the DAS Research programme and of the Theatre and Dance Research Department of the University of the Arts in Amsterdam).

21 Alessandro Questa teaches at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. His research focuses on an ethnographic investigation of indigenous ecologies and the ways they are affected by climate change and extractivist capitalism. He is also the initiator and curator of *Kixpatla: cambiar de vista, cambiar de rostro. Arte y cosmopolítica* – a transdisciplinary digital platform for contemporary artists from American Indian societies.

practices. Guests are expected to be able to set their own working conditions and to participate in self-organization and maintenance work. See: <https://www.massia.ee> (last accessed on 19 Oct 2022).

13 Arthur Rimbaud, "Lettre à Georges Izambard de Mai 1871", in: Gerald Schaffer (ed.), *Lettres du voyant (13 et 15 mai 1871)*, Paris: Librairie Minard, 1975, pp. 134-144.

14 Cf. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012 and *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 130-132.

15 Cf. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2007, p.128.

16 *Climatic Dances* is part of Piña's series *Endangered Human Movements* Vol. 5.

17 Piña charges that the disaster begins with Anglo American considering the mountain as a resource and therefore as dead.

18 Quotation from the performance *Climatic Dances*.

to exist as an ecological force field in and by itself,"²² because in my opinion operational ecological aspects such as travel activities, a sustainable organisation of rehearsals, the handling of materials and resources etc. can no longer be excluded from the discussion of an artistic performance – especially if it claims to be a critical or ecological practice. Performance analyses do not do justice to the complexity of the ecological challenges we face. In *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* Minty Donald reflects about the paradox inherent in his artistic practice, such as the fact that he flew from Scotland to Canada to take up a short residency in order to do research about ecological practices. The recognition of such contradictions is no longer enough.

POLITICAL ECOLOGY

I end with a plea for a political ecology of theatre. What I am currently experiencing is that ecology is finally becoming political. Bruno Latour pointed out that "concern for the environment begins at the moment when there is no more environment, no zone of reality in which we could casually rid ourselves of the consequences of human political, industrial, and economic life."²³ Political ecology is not simply the linking of politics and ecology, and does not simply deal with nature (for what was formerly called nature itself represents a product of the intra-actions of humans and non-humans that – with the help of the sciences – produced specific phenomena and made others disappear). In recent years, the concept of ecology has undergone a significant denaturalization which is most obvious in regard to Morton's phrase "ecology without nature."²⁴ While ecology once referred to the other of technology, it is now closer to technology than to what used to be called nature.²⁵ By foregrounding the questions what a public is and how a common world or cosmos can be composed without automatically referring to the human-nonhuman divide, Latour's and Jane Bennett's conceptions of a political ecology²⁶ are instructive for the invention of practices in this new research field. Political ecology can disclose the interconnectedness of ecology, economics, politics, and socio-cultural developments. The strategy of the German government, for instance, is seeking economic growth through technological progress, ecological modernization and state coordination.²⁷

The performative arts can develop counter-narratives, they can iconoclastically undermine the logic of progress, individualism and permanent growth in order to get to the roots of the problem of a purely exploitative relationship with the earth and other non-humans. I find it promising that a new, affirmative form of capitalism critique could unfold in ecocritical performances – affirmative in the sense of affirming mutual dependencies of heterogeneous actors and actants – such as human communities on local geologies and vice versa. This would not be a moral critique, but a view that tries to include the intra-actions

between actors and actants and thus becomes ecological. Kathryn Yusoff reminds us that "only by defining the earth as dead matter or inert force – that is, as ontologically different matter from that of the biologically conceived colonial political subject – was colonialism able, through measures of political subjectivation, to turn the Other into transportable bodily units in commodity form, thus uprooting them geographically and kinship-wise."²⁸

For the choreographers Huari Mateus and Krężel, collaborating with houseplants presented numerous challenges. The fact that houseplants are uprooted and planted in pots makes them compatible with the *modus operandi* in the performing arts, they say. Only this made travelling with the non-human performers to different performance venues possible at all. For them, one of the main problems was that the plant performers did not feel comfortable in the black box. Every day, they had to be transported to a light-flooded hall for life support. The air conditioning and temperature in the theatre were harmful to some plants and caused them to die.

In light of the climate crisis, the architect Philippe Rahm proposes the development of a meteorological architecture that reduces the energy consumption of buildings and thus opposes climate change, but in doing so also creates a new aesthetic, a kind of post-carbon architecture.²⁹ What would a meteorological theatre be? In my opinion, such a theatre would not only depend on the invention of new aesthetics, but also on more sustainable modes of working and sharing



Martina Ruhsam, *Ecology*, Foto: Photo: Martin

22 Lavery, p. 81.

23 Cf. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy?*, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 58.

24 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, 2009.

25 Cf. Erich Hörl, "Introduction to General Ecology: the Ecologization of Thinking", in: Erich Hörl, James Burton (eds.), *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, p. 1.

26 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 94-108 and Latour, p. 90.

27 Cf. Alejandro Pelfini, "Bruno Latour's Politische Ökologie als Beitrag zu einer reflexiven ökologischen Modernisierung", in: Martin Voss, Birgit Peuker (ed.), *Verschwunden die Natur? Die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie in der soziologischen Diskussion*, Berlin: Transcript, 2006, pp. 157-158.

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28 Kathryn Yusoff, "Geophysik nach dem Leben. Unterwegs zu einer politischen Geologie des Anthropozäns" in: *Springerin*, Nr. 3, Winter 2020 (Post-Anthropozän), p. 46.

29 Cf. von Hantelmann and Morgan (eds.), p.104.