

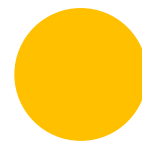
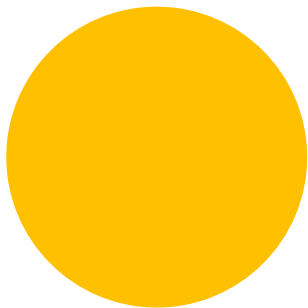
Student blogs Transmission in Motion: plant-based dramaturgy

Introduction

This document compiles a selection of blogposts written by Master and Research Master students at Utrecht University. The students reflect on a session of Transmission in Motion which was thematized around plant-based dramaturgy. In the session, Chilean director Manuela Infante was interviewed by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink. The posts show a variety of perspectives and ideas, and invite further thinking about the performance *Estado Vegetal* and its subject.

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The other in theatre, the other in me

Jolien Akkerman

In the Transmission in Motion Seminar on plant-based dramaturgy, a talk was organized with Chilean theatre director, playwright and musician Manuela Infante. The talk was moderated by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, who asked Infante about the artistic creation process of her work *Estado Vegetal* (Vegetative State). In this work, Infante explored plant-based logic to formulate several procedures as a dramaturgic strategy and structure for the performance (read more about *Estado Vegetal* [here](#)). Furthermore, the seminar went into the idea of theatre as a place to practice thinking by doing. Infante elaborated on her appreciation of the theatre as a place for embodied philosophy, a place to practice an embodied thinking about the idea of what is plant in us and how are we plant in our thinking? I would like to continue this line of thinking towards the approach of other things that are radically different from ourself in the theatre. How can the theatre function as a place to encounter otherness? What is other in ourself or in our thinking?



Estado Vegetal, Manuela Infante. Photo: Maida Carvallo.

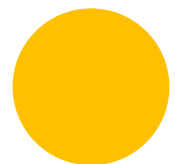
These questions start with a conception of theatre as a place to practice embodied philosophy, where you can encounter concepts, ideas and problems in an open and relational way and establish a relational practice. It is not a representational thinking or a talking about, but an encounter with things that are other. But the theatre may trap us and catch us in representational thinking nonetheless. To encounter otherness easily becomes letting the other speak, giving the other a voice. This, however, upholds a hierarchical structure with the otherness. It presumes the expectation that the other will speak on our terms. Still, the idea of embodied philosophy holds the possibility to not represent ideas or concepts, to not appropriate ideas – but to encounter them.

For *Estado Vegetal*, Infante explained that this meant that the plant-based logic could be encountered in a way that was not a thinking about plants or plant-based logics, but to work from the plant within ourselves. This is not mimicking or representing, but a becoming. It is this becoming-plant that could be practiced in this creation process through embodied philosophy. To further expand this idea of becoming, one can look at the works of Deleuze. The idea of becoming is prominent in his work where he asserts becoming as a process of entering into a

composition with the other (for further reading, see [The Antropology of Becoming](#)). This entering into composition, allows to explore the otherness in oneself without discarding the differences.

To deepen the academic understanding of these ideas, one can also look at the work *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett (see [Vibrant Matter](#)). In this book, Bennett asks how to understand matter as vital and whole in itself, away from the reduction to a usable, comprehensible object. Again, this is a certain non-representational thinking. Bennett also uses Deleuze in her thinking, by her use of the idea of assemblage, which is the idea that one object or thing or entity, is connected to other entities in a unique constellation of leaking, that puts forward a unique kind of ecology. She searches for ways to exercise a reimagining of matter that flattens or undoes hierarchic structures and encounters assemblages as whole, a practice that could be extended to the theatre. Bennett asks for an imaging of an equivalence of all things to create assemblages by which we can imagine how things might interact. Evidently, it is for a reason that Infante mentions Bennett as a starting point of her research for *Estado Vegetal*.

The encountering of otherness without discarding its differences may be the key here. To always encounter the other without erasing its difference, to retain its otherness to you. Infante said something similar in the seminar that I wish to use as my conclusion here. What she said is about allowing the other to leave something in the dark and thereby respecting its otherness. It is about acknowledging the areas that you do not understand, to allow the other to remain obscure in these areas. It is a respect to the notion that “the other is always non-exhausted in its relationship to me.”



Locally-Sourced, Organic Music

Hannah Harder

Manuela Infante refers to her play, *Estado Vegetal*, as performing plant-thinking through polyphonic aesthetics. Being a musician, Infante stresses the importance of rhythmic dialogue as a marker of the plantedness. I am caught on the audibility of plant aesthetics. It is easy to visualize a plant's physicality, as one can conjure images of roots and meandering plant structures. But how can we tune our musically biased ears to plant logic? The play seems to engender an embodied understanding; the body feels the rhythmic flow first as the narrative trails behind. The play forces audiences to be with the winding and adjunct iterations of the dialogue, accepting all its diversions. While the piece is plant-centric, it is the aural textures that impact the human sensibilities and invites this perspective. The rhythmic and musical form heard in the monologues, and creative use of the looping pedal, creates its own universe of nested structures. There is not a linear path to a development and conclusion, but rather incessant declamations that develop organically, winding whichever way they choose. It reminds me most of free jazz or experimental sound art, as listeners move through patterns and textures, rather than through a hierarchically ordered narrative.



The famous American jazz musician Ornette Coleman pioneered a musical ethos that highlighted an individual's capacity for music-making on an intimate level. It strikes me as a sort of meta-music that exists in all people. His musical manifesto urges that everyone has a melody inside them that must be let out (Coleman 1983). Combining individual melodies, as one can imagine, would create a rather unique harmony. Within the western musicological binary of consonant

and dissonant sonorities, a polyphonic performance of disparate melodies would result in an unacceptable cacophony of sound. It may not be consonant or theoretically acceptable, but new relations and affectual possibilities emerge in embracing the new combinations. After all, sound is ultimately democratic. Like plants, sound grows within time, unfurling in indiscriminate assemblages. Coleman has even stated his goal is to “remove the caste system from sound” (Purcell 2007). The legacy of western music, after all, has subscribed a hierarchy to sound that favors a linear progression and disciplines any deviation. Plant structures modulate in the way that unrestrained harmolodics emerge. It is different from the hierarchical organization of the orchestra, the musical score, or the human body. Thinking on the aesthetic of plants reveals the limiting confines of cultural aesthetics. If every plant has roots to unfurl and diverge at will, then every *body* has a rhythm and melody that must resonate alongside the diversity of existing melodies. Sound, in its diverse plantedness, is a polyphonus orchestra that may overwhelm sensibilities. But, if we let ourselves flow with the rhythms and melodies, we can free our bodies to be more in tune with the variety of personal and environmental sonorities that are at play.

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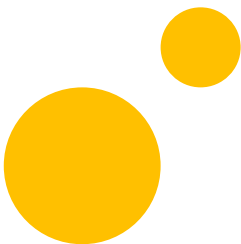
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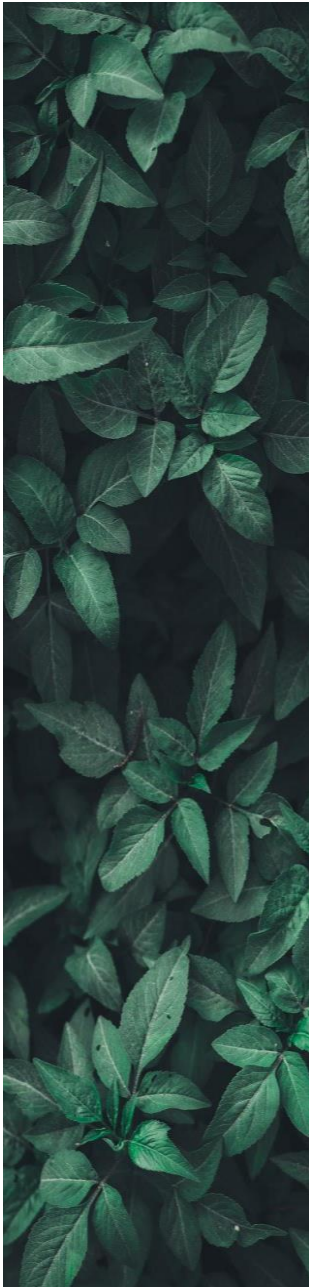
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There's an argument to be made for Dramaturgical Procedures

Madie Jolliffe

In the Transmission in Motion seminar “Plant-Based Dramaturgy,” Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink moderated a discussion with Manuela Infante. Prior to the November 18th seminar, participants had the privilege to watch a registration of *Estado Vegetal* ([trailer here](#)). This performance was an act of Infante thinking through questions of how we relate to plants and what aspects of plants exist in us. The result was not only a beautiful and complex performance, but a collection of plant-based dramaturgical “procedures,” which Infante shared with us during the course of the seminar.



During the discussion, there was a tension between the idea of dramaturgical “principles” and “procedures” which Manuela believes is an important distinction to be made when discussing plant-based dramaturgy. I think this is an important distinction to be made because it is not immediately clear what the difference is, and what that difference suggests. In this post we’ll look at some plant-based concepts used in her dramaturgy, and Manuela’s practice itself to understand the importance of this distinction.

An important concept that Manuela shared with us is that of “non-cognitive” thinking- plants don’t think in terms of ideas and representation, but instead think through movement. They respond to their environment by moving (towards light, away from each other, etc.) and make decisions in this way.

Additionally, Manuela, who is a theatre director, scriptwriter and musician, describes her practice of making as “embodied philosophy.” In a sense, it is a thinking through while creating- using theatre as a method to think through and enact ideas. I see this as a combination of human and plant thinking. We can think about ideas, but also through movement; through reacting to and making decisions based on things that happen during the creation process and the environment. In this way, I see the importance in understanding plant-based dramaturgical strategies to be understood as procedures and not principles.

Principles suggest a series of ideas that must be applied, while *procedures* are ways of doing. These strategies are things that must be used in action- they are thoughts that must be embodied to think through them. This is an action-based dramaturgy.

The plant-based dramaturgical procedures Manuela names are a) Multitudes, b) Branching, c) Modularity, d) Morphing, e) Sedimentation, and f) Phototropism. Without the space to go into all of the procedures, I’d like to illustrate how Phototropism was a procedure used in *Estado Vegetal*. “[Phototropism](#)” is plant growth towards or away from light and when thinking about this with the

scenographer of the show, they played with ways that the actor could relate to light. Like a plant, she would move towards the light, and so contrary to how theatre lighting is typically done where it is cued by the movement of the actor, the actor is always following the change of light. Phototropism is not just a principle, but a procedure which is embodied.

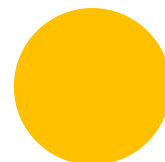
As a side note, I also feel like there is a relationship to the dramaturgical procedures present in plant-based dramaturgy and Indigenous dramaturgies. Indigenous theatre makers and storytellers of Turtle Island (North America) have a very relational approach to creating performance that is extremely embodied (as well as land based). Of course different makers create differently, but from my experience, the thinking process of Indigenous Theatre creation is also very embodied and action-based to the point that after this TiM seminar, I would suggest that the strategies of Indigenous dramaturgies should also be understood as procedures as opposed to principles. However as a settler, I am not any kind of authority on Indigenous dramaturgy and would encourage you to read this thesis by Lindsay Lachance if you are interested to learn more: [*The Embodied Politics of Relational Indigenous Dramaturgies*](#).



Manuela thought the distinction between dramaturgical principles and procedures was important and I think that besides all of the incredible knowledge of plant-based dramaturgy shared with us during this seminar, this is another lesson to be learned. The difference between dramaturgical principles and procedures may at first appear to be a vocabulary difference, but I think it can be extremely helpful to understand dramaturgy as principles to be applied, or procedures to be used in action.

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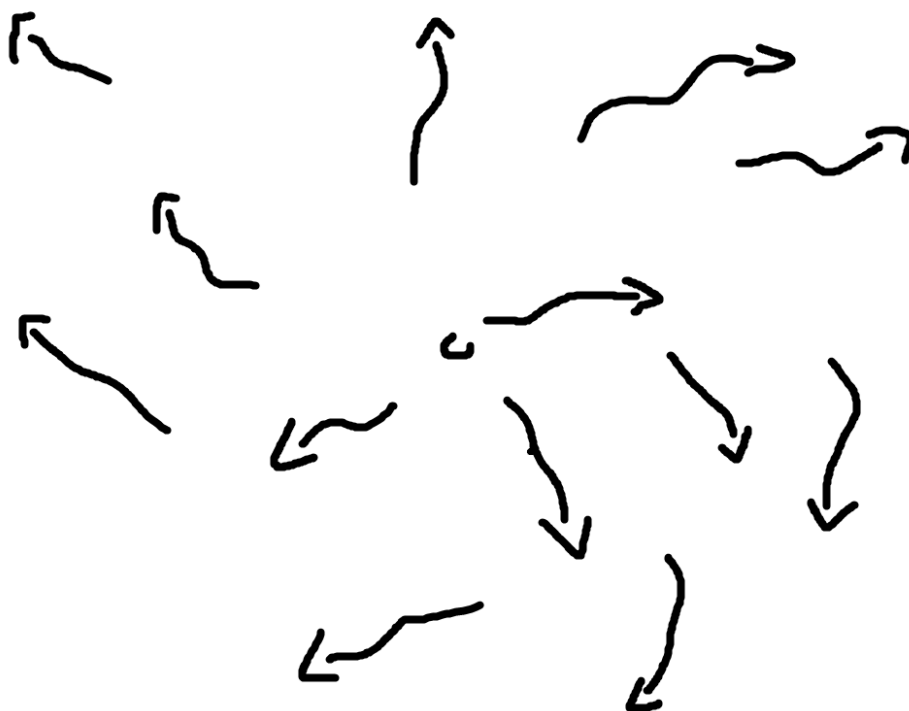


Who Are We?

Floor Mijland

In the Transmission in Motion seminar on November 18th, entitled “Plant-based Dramaturgy”, Liesbeth Groot-Nibbelink interviewed Manuela Infante about her performance *Estado Vegetal* (Vegetal State, CIM/Ae 2017), and the creative process leading up to this theatre piece. Infante uses her theatre practice as a way of thinking through academic ideas based in fields such as speculative realism, new materialist and plant-based philosophy (Utrecht University 2020). In *Estado Vegetal*, Infante’s aim was to give voice to non-human entities, such as plants, offsetting anthropocentric modes of thinking. Unfortunately, she discovered that trying to make plants ‘speak’ kept the anthropocentrism intact. It demanded plants to communicate like humans, causing an important ethical question to arise: How do you relate to something radically other without appropriating it?

Instead of leaving the plants out, Infante stayed with the trouble, in true new materialist fashion, finding an answer in the plant-based philosophy of Michael Marder. Marder proposes to, instead of looking at what is human in plants, look at what is plant in humans, leading Infante to develop a ‘plant-based dramaturgy’. Looking at plants, Looking at plants, it is important to understand that plants are multitudes: they have eyes, mouths, and brains in every root. Plants can branch out endlessly, and every root can be replanted to start this process anew. It is impossible to pinpoint where one plant ends and the other begins, which makes speaking of individuals impossible. Following this logic, in *Estado Vegetal* a few characters (portrayed by the same actress) tell stories centered around a tree in the middle of a borough. These stories involve and evolve around the tree, flowing into one another effortlessly, making the story of the tree richer with each added ‘branch’. Telling stories by branching out from a central point did not feel foreign to Infante, though it took some time to be able to use it dramaturgically. Our neurological structures, she states, seem to be more branch-like we might think. Infante, though it took some time to be able to use it dramaturgically. Our neurological structures, she states, seem to be more branch-like we might think.



Infante's 'discovery' of branch-like neurological structures reminded me of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's work on embodied cognition. In their introduction to *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), entitled "Who Are We?", they explain that cognitive science has shown that "the mind is inherently embodied, [and o]ur understanding of what the mind is deeply [matters]" (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 3). The mind has been inextricably tied to reason, and reason has been seen as the most defining characteristic of human beings. The 'discovery' of the embodied mind required Western philosophy to be critically reevaluated, opening up space for new understandings of reason and, therefore, ourselves (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 3-4).

The discovery of the plant in humans, as portrayed in *Estado Vegetal*, challenges the viewer to rethink the relation between humans and plants. Reimagining our neurological structures as branch-like opens up the opportunity to rethink 'human' reason, and with it challenging humans to rethink themselves too. It may show us to view ourselves not so much as individuals, but more as multitudes. It might enable us to tell branch-like stories that can be replanted or retold over and over again, without pinpointing to one origin. We might begin to understand ourselves to be part of a multitude of humans and non-humans, challenging us to listen to other entities in our multitude, to whom we are connected by branch, without appropriating them.

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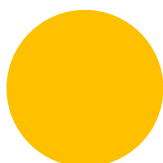
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Image

Mijland, Floor W. 2020. Plant-based dramaturgy. Digital drawing.



Becoming-Plant by Way of Bergson's Method of Intuition

Anthony Nestel

In her recent lecture for the TiM seminar series, Manuela Infante quoted plant philosopher Michael Marder with regard to the making of her piece *Estado Vegetal* (2017): “to recognize a valid ‘other’ in plants is also beginning to recognize that vegetal other within us” (Infante 2020). In order to make sense of the above quote, I will make an appeal to Bergson’s “divisions of life” (Grosz 2005, 215).

Life for Bergson is an absolute contingency: there is no precise explanation for why it unfolded in the forms - humans, animals, plants, etc. - it currently embodies on earth. Life, according to Bergson, has no evolutionary plan, purpose, function or goal. It is only in retrospect that any clear tendency or direction can be discerned. He distinguishes two tendencies/lines along which life unfolds: life as becoming-plant and life as becoming-animal. Bergson defines these becomings as tendencies for the very reason that they are never exclusionary. Regardless of their differences, plant and animal share a common origin, they deviate from one another more and more as duration unfolds, cultivating different goals and intentions. In this respect, these tendencies are in flux, orientations, directions, rather than attributes or static qualities (Bergson 1998). Consequently, following Bergson, animals always possess the inherent potentiality to actualize becoming-plant tendencies, or, in other words, animals have the capacity to become more plant.

Such a difficult endeavor, however, requires some overhuman effort. Bergson conceives this possibility as the overcoming of the human condition through his philosophical method of “intuition”. Intuition, according to Bergson, cannot be confused with empathy, sympathy or feelings; it is an accurate method, able to be sharpened and practiced, for the only purpose of grasping, catching duration. This method anticipates the intellect’s tendencies of representation and symbolization. It takes thus place through a temporary confusion since unlike the intellect, intuition emphasizes the essential interconnectedness of all actual and virtual tendencies in a continuously heterogeneous dynamic whole that is the cosmos. Through intuition, the practitioner can delve into this continuous movement or flow, which Bergson also calls duration or life. This is the main reason why Bergson claims that we all have access, on an everyday basis, to at least some forms or aspects of intuition. These derive from the subjective, personal inner continuity that consists of sensations, actions and affections within a subject. This experience of continuity, as Bergson argues, cannot be grasped by the intellect as changes in one yield changes, imperceptibly, in all (Bergson 2010).

Hence, in my understanding of Infante’s quote, following Bergson, to recognize the vegetal within us requires an impersonal plunge within the flow of life. This can only be done by setting aside our intellect. Therefore, as Infante would affirm, *Estado Vegetal* does not always or entirely make rational sense: the performance succeeds to actualize plant-becoming tendencies as part of its development and performativity. How that takes form, is unfortunately beyond the scope of this short blog post.

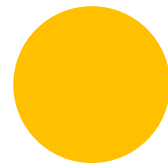
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Decolonization From Within

Eleonora Stacchiotti

The last *Transmission in Motion* session included an inspiring conversation with Chilean theatre director, scriptwriter and musician Manuela Infante. Manuela has introduced us to her ongoing attempts to decolonize the theatrical space from anthropocentric practices through dramaturgies that are based on natural elements. In some sort of biomimicry-like compositions, she translates posthuman theoretical and philosophical works into theatre pieces. *Estado Vegetal*, drawing on plant neurobiology and plant philosophy, is a quiet-but-still subversive endeavor to politicize vegetal life, which becomes in this way the model of a new reconfiguration of human beings on the stage of the world. As a matter of fact, Infante envisions theatre as a laboratory “to make ideas become embodied”, a space where one can enact experiments in thinking and in becoming with the multitudes of objects that crowd the stage. Grounding herself on Michael Marder’s idea that “to recognize a valid ‘other’ in plants is also the beginning to recognize that vegetal other within us” (Marder 2013, as cited by Manuela Infante during the talk at TiM), Manuela Infante is suggesting that the first step to start a proper decolonization of space and time has to be found within ourselves. Although proposing a return to our inner life, plant philosophy expands and cut distances among different kinds of life on planet Earth. However, if we keep expanding the notions of subjectivity and agency within the realm of representational language – that is to say without modifying the modality through which we approach the natural, *word-less* element – the structure of privilege is still in place and the non-human entity in itself has nothing more than a humanized, fetishized mean of expression that depends on human interpretation. In most cases, the spoken and written have the greater role in the Western tradition of storytelling and I find this very problematic.



On the contrary, Infante fully recognized the limitations of human language and understanding for the decolonization process. As highlighted during the seminar, Manuela chose theatre to carry on with her research since, unlike other environments, the performative space allows things to be left unsaid, undiscovered and untold to the human knowledge. In *Estado Vegetal*, she picked rhythm as the main unity of her dramaturgy: the script and the story have been created in a collaboration between the main actress and a loop machine, so that the show is not driven by the importance of the spoken word but is the result of a combination of diverse (human and non-human) voices. Moreover, she put on stage half a dozen of human characters that are interpreted by the same actress, who, in this way, remixes and reformulates the notion of the self as solid and made of inseparable parts. Even if the theatre piece makes use of spoken word to tell a story to the audience, words result to be just a medium for one of the elements making up the performance. Plants mode of existence is rendered through a series of dramaturgical choices – such as light design, the fact that every scene is “modular and self-contained” (Infante 2020), the centrality of rhythm and of the loop machine – and the human direct understanding of it is not Infante’s first concern, as confirmed by herself during the talk.

In the last part of her *Estado Vegetal*, when the only human protagonist reflects on the condition of being in the vegetative state, she pronounces this sentence:

“to be, to grow, always outwards
so that, that thing called I is only the memory
of a seed.
To be one-self is just a seasonal event”

Here, the protagonist juxtaposes the “absurd hierarchy of animal democracy” to the “noble vegetal dispersion” and the “marvelous democratic branches” (Infante 2017), in a movement that reassesses the value of planthood on the animal being. To work towards radical decolonization, it is necessary to decolonize ourselves from the very notion of the *I*, which is nothing more than the embryonic status of an ongoing process of growth and encounter with a borderless, often incomprehensible “other”.

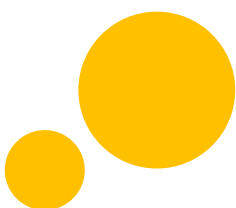
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Thinking Thoughts in Theatre

Tery Žeželj

The title of the Transmission in Motion Seminar on Wednesday 17th of November was *Plant-based Dramaturgy* and it was a conversation with a theatre director, scriptwriter, musician, and thinker Manuela Infante who developed and practices this term. The talk began with Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink stressing an important notion on knowledge produced in practices and continued with Manuela discussing her understanding of theatre as a laboratory of embodied philosophy where you can bring in ideas, think and experiment with them through, or better, together with theatre. She talked about how theatre as a machine somehow thinks with you and helps you highlight some ideas and understand the problem. It is a laboratory. Manuela mentioned in the talk that good problems »explode the theatre«.



Her way of turning *back* to the theatre from finishing the study program of Cultural analysis in Amsterdam started with an interest in new materialism and with an intention to create a no-man's theatrical piece that would open a space for nonhuman bodies. It was theatre that brought her to an important ethical problem in these theories: the position of someone who *can* decide and give an open space to nonhuman bodies to produce what she wants actually perpetuates the hierarchical structure. A way towards dealing with this problem, understanding the ethical dilemma with a still human who has an intention of opening a space to agential, live, and vibrant matter (Bennett) and finding an alternative was based on her reading of Michael Marder's plant philosophy. This is one of the important theoretical basements on which she developed plant-based dramaturgical procedures.

So, how can we create a space and an imaginary for relating and perceiving nonhuman bodies differently? How can theatre function as a laboratory for such questions? What is the ecological potential in its medium¹? Let's think about it by starting from the important position Manuela addressed in the talk. It is about relating to plants without giving them human features as a way

¹ Carl Lavery in his theory discusses that there is no need for theatre to move out of itself, instead an ecological potential lies in its very medium.

of understanding them as agential and equal. This approach is based on the awareness of differences between humans and plants and it does not intend to erase them in order to bring them closer to *us*. Instead, the most important part of accepting the other is accepting its otherness: keeping a difference between humans and plants and building the relationship on the awareness that there will always be a territory we will never enter or understand. Based on that idea, Manuela in their project *Estado Vegetal* developed and proposed a different approach for changing a perspective: instead of drawing out human features in nonhuman bodies, the relations can be formed by questioning ourselves what is there of the plant in us. This is exactly the approach that enables understanding differences that are impossible to dissolve.

I believe it is especially theatre that can be understood as a territory where encountering other bodies through accepting the not-knowing and not-knowable is possible. It is a space that enables the coexistence of differences in a still very much inter-connected knot of forces that are all »becoming-with the body of the whole theatrical piece« (Infante) and are, at the same time, neither pretending that they are the same nor are they interpreted as something like a human or in charge of a human in order to be perceived. This is also connected to the theatrical power of highlighting the awareness of how cultivated we and our mode of looking are.

I believe it is exactly the awareness of the complexity of all the different bodies included that enables new perspectives towards a more ecological and sustainable world. Theatre can be a territory that starts with questioning human position as the only position of reflection and it can be an environment of and for breaking and dismantling our binaries, our hierarchical structures, boundaries between life and death, between human and other organisms, alive and *dead*. Manuela's practice shows us a possible way of making theatre with a big sensibility and awareness of the world around and in us. Or, to conclude with Haraway's words: "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (SF).

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