MATTER

journal of new materialist research

Universitat de Barcelona

ARTICLE

ISSUE 10

Plants as Performers (and More): Rethinking Agency in the Multispecies Performance *Ikebana*

Las plantas como *performers* (y más): repensar la agencia en la performance multiespecie *Ikebana*

Les plantes com a *performers* (i més): repensar l'agència a la performance multiespècie *Ikebana*

Jenni Vauhkonen (0000-0002-8493-9319)

University of Turku, Finland

Date of submission: April 2024
Accepted in: January 2025
Published in: February 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v10i.49365

Recommended citation:

Vauhkonen, Jenni (2025). Plants as Performers (And More): Rethinking Agency in the Multispecies Performance *Ikebana*. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*. 10. University of Barcelona. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v10i.49365

Abstract

This article studies plant agency in a multispecies performance *Ikebana* (2022) by Fern Orchestra. The performance is not only made *with*, but also *for* plants. Through a participatory case study, this article demonstrates how due to the plant turn, as described by Natasha Myers (2015), plants in contemporary art are no longer seen as passive objects of artistic expression – which would be the case in traditional art history. Instead, they have become active agents in the formation of works of art. This shift challenges the anthropocentric view of art as a human creation only. Importantly, it also calls humans to reposition themselves in the multispecies environment more widely and therefore, as I argue, it has the potential to provoke change in anthropocentric societies.

Keywords

Agency; Human-plant relationships; Plant art; Plant turn; Performance art.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia la agencia de las plantas en la performance multiespecie *Ikebana* (2022), de Fern Orchestra. La performance no solo está hecha “con” plantas, sino también “para” ellas. A través de un estudio de caso participativo, el artículo muestra cómo, en el marco del “giro vegetal”, como lo denomina Natasha Myers (2015), las plantas en el arte ya no son vistas como objetos pasivos de la expresión artística, como sí ocurre en la historia del arte tradicional. En su lugar, se han convertido en agentes activos en la formación de obras y producciones artísticas. Este giro cuestiona la visión antropocéntrica del arte como una creación exclusivamente humana. Y, lo más importante, invita al ser humano a reposicionarse en un entorno multiespecie más amplio, con el consecuente potencial de generar cambios en las sociedades antropocéntricas.

Palabras clave

Agencia; Relaciones humano-planta; Arte vegetal; Giro vegetal; Artes performativas.

Resum

El present article estudia l’agència de les plantes dins la performance multiespècie *Ikebana* (2022), de Fern Orchestra. La performance no només està feta “amb” les plantes, sinó també “per a” les plantes. Mitjançant un estudi de cas participatiu, el present article mostra com, dins el marc del “gir vegetal”, com l’anomena Natasha Myers (2015), les plantes en l’art ja no són percebudes com a objects passius d’expressió artística, com és el cas a la història de l’art tradicional. En canvi, s’han convertit en agents actius en la formació d’obres i produccions artístiques. Aquest gir desafia la visió antropocéntrica de l’art com a creació exclusivament humana. I, el més important, demana als humans a reposicionar-se en l’entorn multiespécie de manera més àmplia, amb el conseqüent potencial de generar canvis en les societats antropocèntriques.

Paraules clau

Agéncia; Relacions Home-planta; Art vegetal; Gir vegetal; Art escénic.

Plants as performers (and more): Rethinking agency in the multispecies performance *Ikebana*

Plants have been an area of interest in the natural sciences for a long time, but during the last few decades, there has been a sudden interest towards them in other fields of study as well, especially in the humanities and social sciences. This shift, often referred to as the *plant turn* (Myers, 2015) or the *vegetal turn* (Szczygielska and Cielemęcka, 2019), has simultaneously been implemented and developed in the art world as well, leading artists to include living plants in the processes of making and exhibiting art (see, e.g., Aloi 2020). Plants, of course, have always had a significant role in the visual arts, as materials, pigments and objects of artistic expression. In performances and theatre, they have been used as decoration and props. However, due to the plant turn and its elaborations in contemporary art, they can now be conceptualised as *active agents*. That is to say, they are no longer seen as passive matter, a resource to be represented in paintings or sculptures—which would be the case in traditional art history and Western thought more widely (see e.g. Ryan, 2012, pp. 101–104; Marder, 2013, p. 2; Aloi, 2020, p. 42) — but now have become active agents in the formation of works of art.

Through a participatory case study, this article studies the ways in which the role of plants in contemporary art has changed due to the plant turn – and what kind of transformative potential that change entails. In doing so, this article provides insights into a relatively new type of art that is made in collaboration with living plants[1]. I call this kind of art *plant art*. One of the claims I make is that art is now made not only *with* but also *for* plants—and sometimes both. This scenario challenges anthropocentric views of art as being a human creation only, suggested by the new materialist study of art (see e.g. Barrett and Bolt, 2012; Kontturi, 2018; Kontturi and Tiainen, 2024; Manning, 2012 & 2013). Importantly, it also calls humans to reposition themselves in their multispecies environments more widely and therefore it has the potential to provoke change in anthropocentric societies. I will study this phenomenon through the multispecies performance *Ikebana* (2022) by the Finnish multi-art group Fern Orchestra[2]. While engaging with the performance, I pay attention to the ways in which plant agency is included and how that might challenge anthropocentric ways of thinking. Furthermore, I ask, what kinds of human-plant relationship does the performance propose?

Fern Orchestra is a Finnish multi-art group that collaborates with living plants and micro-organisms to study plant life, plant senses and connected phenomena, such as photosynthesis. Their works combine light- and sound art, performance, contemporary dance, and written contributions. *Ikebana* is a part of their *Plant Series* (part VIII) which highlights, according to the group's description, the connections between humans, nature, and light[3]. This focus suggests that *Ikebana* is not only a *multispecies* performance, combining multiple species, but also an *interspecies* one. As theatre and performance studies scholar Courtney Ryan writes, an interspecies performance "focuses on the act or process of shifting relationships, and the ways in which performance can strengthen and facilitate such relationships" (2013, p. 336). The one-hour performance consists of several scenes where plants and people perform together by, for example,

[1] On previous performances with plants, see e.g. Aloi (2023); Arlander (2020); Gibson and Sandilands (2021).

[2] The list of members who took part in Ikebana: Concept: Vespa Laine; On stage: Plants, Ilona Salonen & Kalle Suominen; Sound design & composition: Markus Heino; Lighting design: Vespa Laine; Interactive media and graphic design: Samuel Salminen; Costume design: Maileena Vaajoensuu; Assistant: Saara Isola; Singing: Saara Isola, Timo Tamminen, Petra Vehviläinen; Drums: Tuomo Latvala.

[3] Every year, Fern Orchestra shifts its focus, alternating between plants on land (*Plant Series*) and plants under water (*Algae Series*).

moving in relation to one another. Traditionally *ikebana* refers to a Japanese tradition of arranging flowers, which has been described as a dynamic dance between humans and nature (Kopytin et al., 2019). In Fern Orchestra's version, however, the interspecies dance is actualised in a literal way as plants join their human co-performers on the stage of a theatre. The plants then move, dance and provide the soundscape as their vital functions run through a modifier, which turns them into an audible form. Moreover, the performance allows plants to join the human audience, as audience members are encouraged to attend the performance with their favourite houseplants. *Ikebana* was performed in Turku (where I experienced it) and in Helsinki, Finland in the winter of 2022, and all ticket proceeds were used to buy forest for preservation as a carbon sink.

Fern Orchestra's works, including *Ikebana*, provide thought-provoking examples of how the plant turn is elaborated in the arts. This turn, of course, has its predecessors. Art historian Giovanni Aloi (2020, p. 41) has noted that artists have been interested in working with living plants for decades, and among the very first he mentions Edward Steichen, an American artist who exhibited selectively cross-bread delphiniums at MoMa New York as early as 1936. In addition, art historian Hanna Johansson (2004, pp. 31–32) describes the early stages of land- and environmental art (which are closely related to plant art), by referring to the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets and his sculptures *Grass Roll* and *Grass Square*, which were made in 1967 from growing grass. Regarding theory, anthropologist Natasha Myers (2015, pp. 40–41), who describes the plant turn as a 21st century phenomenon, also recognises the roots of the turn in the 1970s and the sensational publication *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973) by Peter Tomkins and Christopher Bird. This book revealed astonishing insights into themes such as plant memory, agency and intelligence, which are still—or have become once more—central topics of discussion in the twenty-first-century plant turn. It is also notable that the recent plant turn has developed simultaneously and as a continuum of other turns and theories evolving around the change of the millennium, such as new materialisms, posthumanism and broad philosophical interests towards the nonhuman (e.g. Wolfe, 2003; Haraway, 2007; Derrida, 2008). While the plant turn forms the theoretical backbone of this article, it should be noted that new materialisms and posthumanism are equally influential.

New materialist ways of thinking argue that all matter, objects and things have agency. Therefore, rather than understanding the world – and in this case, an artwork – as a combination of separate passive matters, it is seen as actively formulating and co-becoming in the network of agents (both human and nonhuman) affecting each other (e.g. Braidotti 2002; Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Kontturi and Tiainen, 2024). This line of thought has been extensively elaborated and developed among art studies – even to the extent that their relationship has been described as mutually constitutive (Kontturi and Tiainen, 2023, pp. 241–242). It is notable that despite the name, new materialisms do not refer to entirely novel ways of thinking, but instead are related to decades of humanistic and social theories, especially materialist and feminist theories (Tiainen et al., 2015, pp. 5–6). However, what is new in new materialism is the new understandings of the active and co-emerging character of matter and materiality. These understandings challenge and demand reconsideration of the human perceptions of the multispecies world and their relationship to it (Coole and Frost, 2018, p. 6) – and therefore provide a suitable starting point for looking at plant art and the human-plant relationships they propose. Relatedly, posthumanism is evident in this article as a line of thought that questions human superiority over other species (see e.g. Wolfe, 2010), and it signals my interest towards nonhuman forms of life (especially plants) in the processes of making and experiencing art. In general, posthumanism refers to ways of thinking that have been – and still are – developed to respond to the anthropocentrism of

renaissance humanist thought. The goal is to build on and reform prior humanist ideologies so that they are better aligned with the 21st century scientific understanding of the word; this can be achieved, for example, by recognizing the significance of other species in the processes of world-making (Badmington, 2000; Wolfe, 2010).

Agency is one of the key concepts discussed in this article[4]. The plant turn and its ideas of plant agency stem from scientific realisations that just like humans and animals, plants too have abilities to act, affect and be affected by other entities (Marder, 2013; Chamovitz, 2012). These abilities were also what defined agency for philosopher Bruno Latour (2004, p. 237; 2005, pp. 70–71), as he discussed *actants*[5] and their capabilities to act and modify other entities as a part of the *actor-network theory*. Known also as ANT, this theory is both a methodological and a conceptual approach which foregrounds the nonhuman (or *more-than-human*[6]) entities participating in the processes of world-making (Latour, 2005)[7]. In brief, it suggests that nothing or no one truly exists or acts alone, but always in relation to and in interaction with others – and therefore, action always involves multiple actants.

Although ANT does not specifically articulate what agency is, Latour's writings of the way things act and interact with each other as a part of actor-networks have influenced the ways in which many writers, especially new materialistically oriented ones (including myself and, e.g., Coole, 2013; Halsall, 2016; Conty, 2018) understand the concept of agency[8]. For new materialists, it is especially notable that Latour's (2005, p. 71) understanding of agency expands beyond human actors and recognises the abilities of various nonhuman things and beings to make a difference. Importantly, recognising the agency of plants and other nonhumans has significant ethical implications, as it challenges anthropocentric thinking and broadens the understanding of co-dependencies between species. Moreover, it has the potential to change the ways in which plants, animals and other beings are appreciated and treated – which is crucial while responding to the challenges of our current climate crisis. Among art studies, it has been suggested that, for example, animals (e.g. Raber and Mattfeld, 2017), natural forces (e.g. Arlander, 2018; Türkmen, forthcoming), and microbes (e.g. Vepsä, 2021) have agential capacities in the formation of artworks. In this article, I am especially interested in plant agency and the way in which plants act in relation to humans in the context of contemporary art. Alongside the theories and methods presented in this section, I will be referring to my own experiences of *Ikebana* while constructing an analysis of the performance.

As I discuss *Ikebana*, my aim is to unfold different nuances of plant agency in the performance. The first section of the article focuses on the first scene of *Ikebana* and the agency plants have in it, for example, as performers and musicians. The second section focuses on the interconnectedness of plants and people through dance and relational movement, especially in the second scene of the performance. As these two sections focus

[4] Agency is also often a key concept in new materialist research (see e.g. Coole, 2013; Hickey-Moody and Willcox, 2020; Horn, 2022).

[5] Actants, for Latour (2005, pp. 70–71), can be anything or anyone that has the capability to act, affect or be affected by other entities – and therefore alter the state of things. As an example, he uses a pot that alters the way water boils and a basket that alters the way other things can be carried (ibid).

[6] Instead of proposing a binary separation between the human and the nonhuman, the concept of more-than-human suggests that different beings and materialities co-exist in ways that make it difficult to make clear separations between them (see e.g. Manning, 2013). In the context of art, the concept of more-than-human (see e.g. Manning, 2013) suggests that artworks are not a result of human intention only, but instead they co-emerge in collaborations with different agents and materialities.

[7] Latour is often referred to in studies on the nonhuman in visual arts (e.g., MacNeill, 2012; Hitchings, 2003; Halsall, 2016).

[8] It is notable that new materialist theorising has also been influenced by other writers. For instance, Jane Bennett (2010, pp. 20–38) and her writings on the *agency of assemblages* is in many ways similar to Latour's ANT and equally influential to new materialist understandings of agency. However, Latour's concept works not only as a theoretical model but also a methodological tool – which is why I chose to use it in this article.

on plants on stage, the third section of this article is dedicated to the plants in the audience and how art is now made not only with but also for them. It is notable that my experience of *Ikebana* was also influenced by a plant that accompanied me in the audience. The significance of sharing the experience with this plant will be pondered on toward the end of the article.

Making art with plants

There was excitement and a murmur in the air as the premiere of *Ikebana* was about to begin. Soon the lights in the theatre were switched off and the glittery curtain in front of the stage was lifted, followed by the air being flooded with steam. It was show time. Green rays of light burst through the foggy darkness. Their source was a glimmering spot in the centre of the stage, surrounded by the main performers—the plants. From this cluster of performers, I recognised a variety of individuals, such as the snake plant (*Dracaena trifasciata*), an *aloe vera* and a beautiful Swiss cheese plant (*Monstera deliciosa*). The rays bursting through the plants increased one by one and began to move around slowly as if they were scanning the room. The plants and the lights were accompanied by a humming soundscape that included little squeaks resembling a birdsong, which, paired with the tropical plants created the ambience of a jungle in the space.

Shortly thereafter, a human dancer appeared on stage and subtly approached the plants as if she were trying to make contact with them. Moving slowly, she knelt in front of the plants and started moving her body in a way that seemed as if she were feeling or following the moving lights. These calm, flowy movements created an impression of balance and harmony between the dancer and her surroundings. The dancer's movements and the plants were visible to the audience only as silhouettes, as the green lights glimmered from behind them (Figure 1). From this point forward, the sense of

Figure 1: Photo by Maileena Vaajoensuu, all rights reserved.

harmony was broken as the dancer's movements became faster and more dramatic. Approaching the centre, the source of the light and the plants and then again drawing away from them, she kept moving as if she had lost the connection between herself and the cluster of plants and was trying to recover her balance with them.

Striving for balance between humans and plants is one of the things that connects Fern Orchestra's version of *Ikebana* to traditional ikebana – a Japanese tradition of arranging flowers. Today ikebana is considered a disciplined form of art that brings together human creativity and nature (Kopytin et al., 2019). In the art of ikebana, balance is key, as the flower compositions can sometimes defy gravity. Therefore, ikebana masters use their breath, intent, and delicate bodily movements to become aligned with the flowers and to find the centre of gravity in their arrangement (ibid., p. 97). Intriguingly, in an article related to art therapy, psychiatrist Alexander Kopytin and his colleagues (2019, p. 98) describe the interactive process of creating traditional ikebana as a dynamic dance between humans, flowers and nature. However, in Fern Orchestra's version of ikebana, this interspecies dance materialises in a literal way as the dancer tries to find a connection between the movements of the human body and the plants on stage. The dancer's movements relate to those of an ikebana master as they both strive to find a relationship with plants.

As the dancer's movements accelerated, so did the rhythm and diversity of the soundscape: the humming and the squeaks evolved into a rhythmic, electronic beat that guided the dancer's movement. The soundscape was soon reinforced with different rhythmic cracks and clangs that came together as music. The peculiar soundscape was clearly created electronically, but what might be surprising is that plants also took part in its production. Music originating from plants can be created by using a variety of techniques based on sensors adapted to plants to measure their vital functions. The method on which these techniques are based was originally invented by an Indian physicist and botanist Jagadish Bose in the 1920s and later developed in the 1960s by Soviet botanist Ivan Gunar[9]. As different impulses and liquids run through plant bodies and tissues, the sensors detect slight changes in them and convert them into soundwaves and therefore into an audible form (Kalle Hamm n.d.[10]). Fern Orchestra (and multiple other artists)[11] have used this technique to create unique sounds arising directly from the plants. Sometimes these sounds are used as they are, and sometimes artists develop them into a more musical form. Both methods were used to create the soundscape of *Ikebana*. It was clear that the main soundscape was converted into a musical form, but on top of that, there were more spontaneous and variable sounds, which seemed to originate directly from the plants seen on stage. It was visible to the audience that from time to time these plants were moved by human hands, and that these movements occurred simultaneously with the different sounds. This way, the audience could hear how the plants on stage reacted to being touched and moved by humans.

The spontaneous sounds heard during *Ikebana* not only signalled that the plants on stage had vital functions but also that they were sensible beings. As philosophers like Michael Marder (2013) and plant geneticists such as Daniel Chamovitz (2012) have made clear, despite their seemingly stillness, plants do have immensely complex sensory and regulatory systems that allow them to react to the ever-changing conditions of their environments. For example, in his book *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to The Senses*, Chamovitz (2012, pp. 9, 27, 49) uses playful language to describe

[9] This technique was originally used to create *plant signatures*, where a plant's vital functions were turned into waves on paper – resembling a written signature or an electrocardiogram of the plant (Terracciano, 2018).

[10] Kalle Hamm is a Finnish artist who has used similar techniques in his works.

[11] E.g., Lilli Haapala, Band of Weeds, Kalle Hamm & Dzamil Kamager.

how plants can *see* if you come near them, *smell* if their neighbours are being cut down by a gardener and *feel* when they are being touched. He highlights that humans and plants are fundamentally different beings and therefore plants cannot see, smell or feel in the same sense as humans do, but that they have their own nonhuman ways of sensing and making sense of their environment (ibid. see e.g. pp. 3–5). These plant senses became audible in *Ikebana* as the sensors measured the plant's vital functions and recorded their reactions to being touched and moved by their human co-performers. Each plant had a unique *sound*: some of them were bass-like, some crackled, some whistled and so on. It was also evident that they all reacted differently to touch, adjusting their vital functions, and sending messages through their bodies, from roots to leaves, which, because of the sensors, could be heard in the audience.[12] I find this an interesting way to make plant agency not only visible but audible to human audiences. Importantly, by making plant agency detectable to humans, *Ikebana* opens up opportunities to rethink outdated and fictional understandings of plants as passive and still beings.

Plants were included in this scene (and for the rest of *Ikebana,* too) as active agents alongside humans: for example, as performers and musicians. One could argue the opposite by suggesting that the plants did not consciously take part in the performance: that they had neither expressed this intention nor given their consent—and that therefore they were merely passive objects used by humans. These are all valid points and lead to broader conversations about plant intelligence and intentionality—which are some of the most contentious topics discussed in the plant turn (see e.g. Chamovitz, 2018). They also raise the question of what agency means. For example, does one need to be intelligent or act intentionally to have agency? While some zoocentric and anthropocentric understandings of agency agree that intelligence is necessary, this is not the case with philosopher Bruno Latour, to whom I refer to in my understanding of agency. For Latour (2005, p. 71), as with new materialist thinking, agency is not defined by intentionality or any kind of mentality (including intelligence) – but by affectivity. From this point of view the ability to affect and be affected, or in philosopher Brian Massumi's words, "to be open to the world, to be active in it and to be patient for its return activity" (2015, p. ix) is what makes an agent. The plants in *Ikebana* do affect many things: the atmosphere, the lightning, the dancer's movements, the soundscape and so on. Without their agency, the performance simply would not be the same.

Certainly, the humans were also active agents in the scene and had a significant role in making plant agency perceptible to the audience. However, I want to highlight that plants and their agency cannot be fully controlled by humans. For example, Fern Orchestra's light artist Vespa Laine has said that plants can have good and bad gig-days: you never know exactly how they will sound in a live performance (Kahila, 2018). Even though the impulses going through a plant's body can be regulated to some extent – for example by touching them or spraying them with water – sometimes the plants simply refuse to make the same sounds as in rehearsals. Laine commented on one of her earlier performances with plants by saying that "instead of a chamber orchestra, I had a punk band on my hands… I understood that the plants will do what they want" (*ibid.*)[13]. For me, this uncontrollability, and the way it is embraced in the spontaneous sounds of *Ikebana*, are excellent examples of the way in which plant agency is included in the performance. Fern Orchestra's aim does not seem to be to control the plants or to simply use them as tools for the human artist's own expression, but to let the

[12] For someone without prior knowledge of Fern Orchestra's works it might have been unclear where these sounds originated from. However, after the performance there was a *Plant Jam Session*, where the technique used, and the sounds created were introduced to the audience.

[13] This is my own translation of Laine's comment that was made in Finnish.

Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 10 (2025)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

plants express themselves in their own way, and to find the balance between plant and human agency. At the premiere of *Ikebana,* the plants were thriving. As they squeaked and whistled, buzzed, and crackled, they also confused, mesmerised and entertained the audience in their own unique way – making the performance more-than-human.

An interspecies dance

In this section, I will focus on the interconnectedness of human and plant agencies, especially in the second scene of *Ikebana.* Instead of a flower arrangement, Fern Orchestra describes their version of *Ikebana* as a *kinaesthetic inter-species composition*,

Figure 2: Photo by Maileena Vaajoensuu, all rights reserved.

Toward the end of the first scene, it seemed as if the dancer achieved some communication with the centre of the room, where the lights and the plants welcomed her closer. Similar to the practitioners of traditional ikebana, she managed to create a relationship with the plants and eventually reached a balance with them. Soon after this encounter the dancer left the stage, and the plants were once again the only performers left to be seen. They had all the attention – not as props, as they are often seen in performance settings, but as active agents: performers and musicians.

which "challenges the viewer to relinquish the requirement of being separate from the rest of nature and invites the experiencer to face otherness" (Fern Orchestra, n.d.). I suggest that the idea of human separateness from the rest of the world is questioned through the interspecies dance seen on stage, which I will study through the concepts of *interagency* and *relational movement*. Interagency is a concept created by philosopher Vinciane Despret, according to whom, "there is no agency that is not interagency" (Despret, 2013, p. 44). Instead, different agents become "companion-agents through encounters, conflicts, collaborations, fictions, affinities – a rapport of

forces" (*ibid.*). She continues by highlighting that agency is never about independence but instead, "To be an agent requires dependency upon many other beings" (ibid.). In the case of *Ikebana*, interagency then, would refer to the way in which the human dancers, the plants on stage, the lights and other material circumstances around the performance form a rapport of forces that formulate the entity together.

The idea of interagency resonates with artist and philosopher Erin Manning's writings on relational movement. She suggests that all bodies, both human and nonhuman, are always on the move and moving in relation to one another (Manning, 2012, pp. 13–17; 2013, p. 17). What makes relational movement especially applicable to *Ikebana* is that Manning (2012, pp. 13–17) demonstrates it through dance: how dancers position themselves in relation to their partner, follow each other's steps, make room for each other and anticipate the other's future movements. It is notable that beyond Manning, dancing, as an approach, is frequently used among new materialistic research[14]. For example, art historian Katve-Kaisa Kontturi (2018) demonstrates dancing as a way of *following* art and making its moving materiality felt.[15] Manning (2012, p. 14) writes that relational moving together, such as dance, has the potential to challenge dichotomies, such as abstract-concrete, mind-body and man-woman, which often occupy Western thinking. In the case of *Ikebana* the dichotomies challenged include, for example, human-nonhuman (specifically human-plant), and active-passive. Movement per se, does not challenge these dichotomies, but as Manning (*ibid*., pp. 14–15) explains, it allows humans to approach them from alternative, shifting perspectives.

It is notable that both relational movement and interagency also connect to Latour's (2004; 2005) idea of agency as something that always forms in networks, such that nothing or no one really acts alone but only in relation to others. Even further, all of these concepts: interagency, relational movement, Latour's agency and networks, connect to new materialistic understandings of reality as always formulating in a continuous state of emergence. The network of agents in *Ikebana* (especially the lights, the human dancers and the plants) collaborated through interagency as they moved in relation to each other, affected each other, and were affected by one another.

For example, during the second scene of *Ikebana,* a *plant-sensei*[16] (Figure 2) enters the stage and helps the plants take over the space by picking them up from the cluster and placing them around the stage, so as to be seen individually[17]. As he moves the plants, he is also being moved by the plants. After positioning the plants in their places, the sensei used his body movements to relate to each plant and mimic their positions. This activity resembles what anthropologist Natasha Myers (2014; see also 2015, p. 59) refers to as *vegetalising* the senses. Myers (2014) describes this method as imagining one's body transforming into a plant-body: she calls for imagining one's feet as roots digging into the ground, one's hands as branches or leaves waving in the wind, and so forth.

There are quite a lot of similarities between human- and plant-bodies, such as fluid circulation and a passion for sunlight, which, as I argue, make empathising with plants – or vegetalising possible. These similarities and connections are made visible and tangible to the audience of *Ikebana* as the *sensei* follows the plants and moves in relation to them. Through this shifting perspective, he seeks and

[14] Besides Manning and Kontturi see e.g. LaMothe (2015); Hickey-Moody, Palmer, & Sayers (2016).
[15] In her book *Ways of Following* (2018) Kontturi demonstrates *following* as an attentive and sensuous method of engaging with art in the making.
[16] The term *plant-sensei* comes from Fern Orchestra. They have not explained the term further, but the word sensei refers to a Japanese title for e.g. teacher (especially in martial arts), master or a professional.
[17] The plant-sensei actually does this part (spreading the plants across the stage) in the shadows with the help of another human performer before appearing on stage.

feels various plant-like positions: postures, states and stills inspired by different plants. Figure 2 shows how the *sensei* searches for a position where his hands resemble a tree's branches, and his fingers resemble a tree's leaves. He is delicately adjusting his position to match the plant next to him and finds a similar balance in his own body. One could even ask: is the *sensei* performing with a plant or as a plant[18]?

One of the plant imitations by the *sensei* captured my attention more than any other – it was the one of the aloe vera plant, where the *sensei* adjusted his body into a pointy, stiff position as if he was one of the spikes of the plant. The similarities between the *sensei*'s stiff movements and the aloe vera were apparent to the audience. These plant imitations show how through vegetalisation and relational movement the *sensei* found direct bodily connections to the plants and in doing so, released their inner aesthetic forces. In my reading, this relation found through movement also has the potential to open up a dialogue between species and different kinds of beings. Much like an ikebana practitioner, the *sensei* reduced his own role in the scene to make it more about the plants (Kopytin et al., 2019, p. 97); they were the starting point for every movement and every breath. This alone marks a shift in perspective for Western human-plant relationships: the plants were not controlled or forced to suit human intentions but instead the human-adapted himself to the plants. As the audience followed this practice, they could empathise – if not with the positions and bodies of the plants, then the *sensei*'s versions of them – and obtain a glimpse of what it might be like to find one's inner plant.

As I write about humans finding their inner plant, I am writing poetically. As Michael Marder states: "There is little doubt that the sense of the world from animal, let alone the vegetal, standpoint remains inaccessible to us" (2013, p. 9). In other words, it is impossible for humans to completely know what it is like to be a plant – as they are fundamentally different beings from us (despite the similarities). Even though Marder's method of plant-thinking aims to understand plants better, it is important not to avoid over-interpretation. While approaching plant perspectives, the challenge is, in Marder's words, "to let plants be within the framework of what, from our standpoint, entails profound obscurity, which, throughout the history of Western philosophy, has been the marker of their life" (2013, p. 9). That is to say, while approaching plants, we can never completely step into their shoes – or as Marder (2013, p. 10) puts it, into their roots. However, already from the point of view of human-caused environmental problems, it is important to understand the interconnectedness and dependencies between humans and plants – and to find new ways of relating to plants more closely without making any excessive interpretations.

Much like traditional Japanese ikebana, Fern Orchestra's version of it is not about being one with plants but about finding new ways of relating to them. As Kopytin, Bockhorni and Zhou (2019, pp. 96–99) write, ikebana is all about attuning ourselves and levelling with plants – finding common ground, new relationships and means of intertwining – thus, finding ways to live in balance and harmony with one another.

Art for the plants

I want to highlight that *Ikebana* was not only made *with* plants but also *for* them as the human audience was invited to attend the performance together with their favourite houseplants[19]. I remember vividly the moment I arrived at the theatre to see the performance

[18] As Annette Arlander (2020, p. 125) writes about different strategies of combining plants and performance, she mentions "humans performing as plants" as one of them.

[19] Surely, making art for plants is about more than just asking people to bring their houseplants along. As with *Ikebana,* and the additional examples provided in this chapter, the plants need to be considered as the audience while making and planning the artwork: how they are placed in the audience, what stimuli they are provided with, etc.

Figure 3: Detail from a photo by Samuel Salminen, all rights reserved

and stopped at the cloakroom to check in my outerwear. There was a woman next to me who put her gloves, handbag, and a houseplant on the counter as she was taking her coat off. It was clear that I was in the right place. This woman had come in with a beautiful orchid and as I watched her walk toward the theatre hall, with the delicate plant swaying in her arms, I regretted not having brought a plant myself.

However, moments before the performance was about to begin, Laine from Fern Orchestra came out to meet the audience. As she walked into the hall, she was pushing a wooden wheelbarrow filled with a variety of houseplants. She welcomed everyone and explained that since some cultural events provide so-called *cultural friends* to accompany people who do not wish to attend events alone, Fern Orchestra would provide plant friends to accompany the audience. Subsequently, one by one the audience members approached the wheelbarrow, picked out a plant and moved along to find their seats.

After a few minutes, I sat down in the theatre hall, accompanied by my new vegetal acquaintance, which was introduced to me as a winter cactus (*schlumbergera*). I remember sitting there, forming a relationship with this plant, and looking back at the rest of the audience—which probably consisted of as many plants as people. What a peculiar sight that was. While looking at the audience and their greenery, for a fleeting moment I had an uncanny feeling of being a minority. It was almost like I was crashing a plant party. This feeling may have had something to do with what Fern Orchestra (n.d.) described as the aim of the performance, that is, to invite the experiencer to face otherness. For the first time, as a human, I was not the primary audience – now I shared that role with the plants. I was very aware of the plant on my lap during the performance, and surprisingly, I felt that it shared my experience – to some

extent—and provided me with company. Together we experienced the two scenes described above, and many others: for example, one with a laser race of the plants and another with a singing queen ivy ascending from the ceiling. There were moments during the performance where I wondered how the plant on my lap experienced what was happening around it: did it enjoy the lights, the sounds or perhaps the warmth of my hands around its pot? While keeping in mind Chamovitz's (2012) writings on plant sensorium, it seems fair to say that it did sense these things. However, *how* it experienced them is (and probably will always be) a mystery to humans – since as Marder (2013, pp. 9–10) reminds us, the world of plants is inaccessible for us.

The setting of *Ikebana*, where plants constituted a significant part of the audience, challenged traditional understandings of art as something only made for humans. Similar gestures to de-centre the human in art by including other species in the audience are evident in the art world. In fact, contemporary art shows that due to the plant turn and an increasing interest in the nonhuman world, there is a growing number of artworks especially aimed at nonhuman audiences. As art made *for* plants is still significantly less known than art made *with* plants, I want to provide a few additional examples besides *Ikebana* to demonstrate the phenomenon. For example, Finnish artist Tuija Kokkonen has created a series of interspecies performances where she reads to dogs and plants and explores the difference in the human readers' experiences when the audience consists of nonhuman beings[20]. Another example on a larger scale from Finland is a five-day music and visual art event *Music for Plants (1. 5.2021)*, which was organised at the Kaisaniemi Botanical Garden in Helsinki by the multimedia production studio Veli Studio[21]. As the title suggests, the event was primarily designed for plants even though a human audience was also welcomed to attend. Another example of an artwork where music was made for plants is the Spanish artist Eugenio Ampudia's *Concert for the Biocene* (2020). The concert was organised at the Barcelona Opera House where the audience – consisting of 2292 plants, which took up the full capacity of the theatre – enjoyed Giacomo Puccini's *Crisantemi* played by a string quartet. As the plants filled the opera house, there was no human audience present. In fact, the concert was only accessible to humans through online streaming and later through video recordings. In other words, humans were the secondary audience for this artwork.

The examples above show that art made for plants is a phenomenon that is evident far beyond *Ikebana*. One could ask, of course, what is the point of performing or making art for plants if there is no way of knowing how they experience it or if they even *care* about it. I believe the most important thing about making art for plants – or for any other nonhuman species – is that it broadens understandings of the multispecies societies we are all a part of. It blurs the boundaries between hierarchical dichotomies such as us-others, human-nonhuman and nature-culture and helps to break the habit of looking at the other extreme of the polarity through the lens of inferiority. Making people look at plants in new ways is a political act, one that has the potential to provoke change in anthropocentric societies and push people to rethink their relationship with plants. The fact that there is a growing number of artworks trying to challenge people's understandings of the multispecies world is an indication of a growing need for change.

After the *Ikebana* performance, there was a possibility to participate in a *Plant Jam Session* where the audience was invited to make sounds with plants. The human participant first

[20] *Chronopolitics with Dogs and Trees* (2012–2014) was performed in Stanford, Helsinki, Berlin and Hamburg.

[21] There are many examples across the globe of music made for plants, but perhaps one of the most well-known is Mort Garson and his album *Mother Earth's Plantasia* (1976).

chose a plant to collaborate with, then took a sensor in one hand and touched the plant with another. One could hear the *vibe* between oneself and the plant immediately and change it by adjusting one's touch. This was a very tangible way to connect with the plants—to create something together, or as Despret (2013) would put it, in interagency. Following her description of the concept, the human participant was dependent upon many other agencies in the process of creating these sounds (ibid., p. 44)—for example the Orchestra members giving instructions, the mechanical equipment being used, and perhaps for the most part, the plants. What was surprising to me was that the plants reacted differently to each human touching them. For example, there was some kind of begonia plant labelled as a *good screamer*, which seemed especially displeased with my touch, as it released a clearly more high-pitched noise than it did with the person before me. I also wanted to experience the sound between me and the winter cactus that I had held during the performance. It transpired to be an upbeat drumming.

Experiencing *Ikebana* definitely affected my own thinking and way of relating to plants. Sitting in the audience with a plant on my lap was a peculiar experience for me – something very much out of the ordinary. As I went home after the performance, I felt welcomed by my houseplants, and looked at them in a different light: as if I saw more in them than before. The thoughts and ideas provoked by *Ikebana* have stayed with me, which indicates something about the potential of art to affect through the senses, through affects, emotions and thoughts, and thus influence the way one relates to the world.

Conclusion

In the multispecies performance *Ikebana*, the plants ascended from props to performers—and more: they took part in the performance as active agents, co-creators, dancers, musicians, muses, audience members and companions with whom the experience could be shared. *Ikebana* challenged the viewers to see and think of plants as all these things. This format, where art is made both with and for the plants, challenges anthropocentric views of art as a human creation only—and as something only worth making for humans. Importantly, this configuration also calls humans to reposition themselves in their multispecies environments more widely and therefore, as I argue, it has the potential to provoke change in anthropocentric societies.

While questioning the human-centric thought and ideas of agency, *Ikebana* introduced an alternative human-plant relationship, similar to the one that traditional ikebana practice aims to achieve: one where species can act together, find new ways to relate to each other and live in balance and harmony. The balance between different species and agencies was achieved through the shifting perspective of dance and relational movement. The moving approach made it possible for humans to attune themselves to the plants and work in interagency. This kind of human-plant relationship was also encouraged as the human audience could attend together with their favourite houseplants – or borrow one from Fern Orchestra. The winter cactus lent to me significantly influenced my experience of the performance and therefore, in some way, took part in the theorisation of this article. This *manoeuvre* in thinking, suggested by *Ikebana*, is a great challenge to stereotypically anthropocentric, capitalist Western cultures where nature's resources are often exploited in a short-sighted way for economic profit. The fact that there is an increasing quantity of art trying to provoke change in these societies and offer alternative ways of relating to the world speaks for the need and urgency for a paradigm shift.

Looking at plants as active agents instead of simply passive matter or a resource for humans to take advantage of enables a better understanding of the ways in which we relate to plants, how our actions affect them and how their actions (or possible lack of them in the

future) affect us. The hashtag *#everythingbutphotosynthesisispointless* used by Fern Orchestra speaks of the vital importance of plants to humans and all forms of life. In these times of environmental crisis, it is crucial to find a relationship and a balance between humanity and nature. Whether that is done through art, dancing, writing, arranging flowers, or any kind of action, connecting with plants seems to be the right course of action.

Bibliography

Aloi, Giovanni (2020). Rashid Johnson: Plants, Presence, and Care. *Esse,* 99, 40–47.

Aloi, Giovanni (2023). *Estado vegetal. Performance and Plant-Thinking.* University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jj.1308402

Arlander, Annette (2018). Performing with the Weather. *Global Performance Studies*, 1(2). https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv1n2a5

Arlander, Annette (2020). Performing with Plants in the Ob-scene Anthropocene. *Nordic Theatre Studies*, 32(1), 121–142. https://doi.org/10.7146/nts.v32i1.120411.

Bennett, Jane (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.

Badmington, Neil (2000). Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism. In Neil Badmington (Ed.), *Posthumanism* (pp. 1–10). Palgrave.

Barrett, Estelle & Bolt, Barbara (2012). *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a "new Materialism" through the Arts*. I.B. Tauris.

Braidotti, Rosi (2002). *Metamorphoses: towards a materialist theory of becoming*. Polity.

Chamovitz, Daniel (2012). *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Chamovitz, Daniel (2018). Plants are intelligent; now what? *Nature Plants,* 4(9), 622–632. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41477-018-0237-3

Cielemęcka, Olga, Szczygielska, Marianna & Sandilands, Catriona (2019). Thinking the Feminist Vegetal Turn in the Shadow of Douglas-firs: An Interview with Catriona Sandilands. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience,* 5(2), 1–19.

Conty, Arianne Françoise (2018). The Politics of Nature: New Materialist Responses to the Anthropocene. *Theory, Culture & Society,* 35(7-8), 73–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418802891

Coole, Diana (2013). Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences. *Millennium,* 41(3), 451–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829813481006

Despret, Vinciane (2013). From Secret Agents to Interagency. *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History,* 52: 29–44.

Fern Orchestra. (n.d.) *Ikebana – Plant Series VIII*. Retrieved March 6, 2024, from https://www.fernorchestra.com/en/ikebana.php

Gibson, Prudence & Sandilands, Catriona (2021). Introduction: Plant Performance. *Performance Philosophy*, 6(2), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2021.62372

Halsall, Francis (2016). Actor-Network Aesthetics: The Conceptual Rhymes of Bruno Latour and Contemporary Art. *New Literary History,* 47(2/3), 439–461.

Hickey-Moody, Anna, Palmer, Helen & Sayers, Esther (2016). Diffractive Pedagogies: Dancing across New Materialist Imaginaries. *Gender and education,* 28(2), 213–229.

Hickey-Moody, Anna & Willcox, Marissa (2020). Feminist affect and children's embodied trauma. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, *1*(2), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v1i2.30911

Hitchings, Russell (2003). People, plants and performance: On actor network theory and the material pleasures of the private garden. *Social & Cultural Geography,* 4(1), 99–113.

Horn, Christine (2022). Remote Communities, Material Entanglements and Information and Communications Technologies as Double Agents. *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research,* 6, 30–59. https://doi.org/10.1344/jnmr.v3i2.40223

Johansson, Hanna (2004). *Maataidetta jäljittämässä: Luonnon ja läsnäolon kirjoitusta suomalaisessa nykytaiteessa 1970–1995* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Helsinki]. Like.

Kahila, Mari (2018, May 19). Vespa Laine tekee musiikkia huonekasveilla: 'Käsissäni olikin punkbändi, eikä kamariorkesteri'. *Yle*. https://yle.fi/a/3-10212203

Kalle Hamm. (n.d.) *Band of Weeds*. Retrieved January 25, 2024, from https://www.kallehamm.fi/band-of-weeds-2/

Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa (2018). *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration*. Open Humanities Press.

Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa & Tiainen, Milla (2024). New Materialisms and (the Study of) Art: A Mapping of Co-emergence. In Felicity Colman & Iris van der Tuin (Eds.), *Methods and Genealogies of New Materialisms* (pp. 241–266). Edinburgh University Press.

Kopytin, Alexander, Bockhorni, Reginaldo & Zhou, Tony Yu (2019). From Ikebana to Botanical Arranging: Artistic, Therapeutic, and Spiritual Alignment with Nature. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy,* 5(2), 96–108. https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2019/5/35

LaMothe, Kimerer (2015). *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/lamo17104

Latour, Bruno (2004). *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy.* Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press.

MacNeill, Kate (2012). Narratives of Public Art: Yellow Peril, Vaultand a Large Yellow Object. *Public Art Dialogue,* 2, 15–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/21502552.2012.662770

Manning, Erin (2012). *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*. The MIT Press.

Manning, Erin (2013). *Always More than One: Individuation's Dance.* Duke University Press.

Marder, Michael (2013). *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Columbia University Press.

Massumi, Brian (2015). *Politics of affect.* Polity.

Myers, Natasha (2014). Sensing botanical sensoria: A kriya for cultivating your inner plant. *Centre for Imaginative Ethnography*. https://imaginative-ethnography.com/imaginings/affect/sensing-botanical-sensoria/

Myers, Natasha (2015). Conversations on Plant Sensing: Notes from the Field. *NatureCulture,* 3, 35–66.

Myers, Natasha (2017). From the anthropocene to the planthroposcene: Designing gardens for plant/people involution. *History and Anthropology,* 28(3), 297–301.

Raber, Karen & Monica Mattfeld, Monica (2017). *Performing Animals: History, Agency, Theater*. Penn State University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271080789

Ryan, Courtney (2013). Playing with Plants. *Theatre Journal,* 65, 335–353.

Ryan, John Charles (2012). Passive Flora? Reconsidering Nature's Agency through Human-Plant Studies. *Societies,* 2, 101–121.

Szczygielska, Marianna & Cielemęcka, Olga (2019). Introduction to special section: Plantarium: Human-Vegetal Ecologies. *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience,* 5(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i2.32875.

Terracciano, Emilia (2018). Jagadish Chandra Bose and Plant Autographs. *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts,* 70(2), 94–97.

Tompkins, Peter & Bird, Christopher (1973). *The Secret Life of Plants*. Harper & Row.

Türkmen, Murat (Forthcoming). Auto/sym-poiesis in Heini Aho's Installations: Re-thinking the Natural Forces. *Nordiques* 45.

Vepsä, Suvi (2022). Minä olen moneus: Mikrobiaalisia kohtaamisia nykytaiteen prosesseissa. *Tahiti*, *12*(3), 28–49. https://doi.org/10.23995/tht.120184

Wolfe, Cary (2010). *What is posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.

Author information

Jenni Vauhkonen (0000-0002-8493-9319)

e-mail: t09jvauh@utu.fi

Jenni Vauhkonen is a doctoral researcher in the Department of Art History at the University of Turku, Finland. In her multidisciplinary research, combining art history, biology and philosophy, she focuses on living plants and their agency in the field of contemporary art. Her work is situated at the intersection of environmental humanities, critical plant studies and new materialist art research.