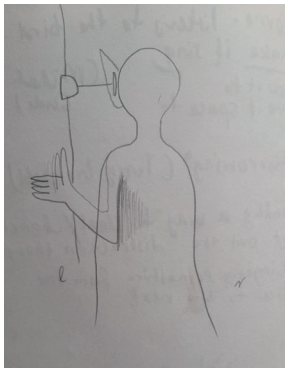
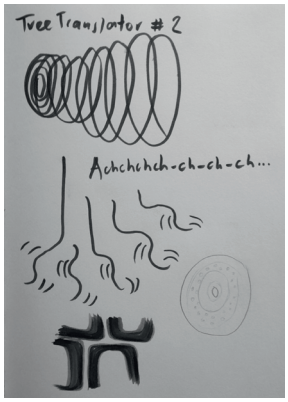
TREE TRANSLATOR: PERFORMATIVE AND VISUAL PRACTICES TO EMBODY SPECULATIVE FABULATION FOR POSSIBLE FUTURES IN INTERSPECIES RELATIONS

Nora Haakh



→ Fig. 1:
Nora Haakh, *Tree Translator Position*, pencil on paper, Brivezac, 2018. Courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 2:
Nora Haakh, *Tree Translation # 1*, markers and dried leaf on paper, Brivezac, 2018. Courtesy of the author.



→ Fig. 3:
Nora Haakh, *Tree Translation # 2*, markers on paper, Brivezac, 2018. Courtesy of the author.

Nora Haakh, Tree Translator: Performative and Visual Practices to embody Speculative Fabulation for possible Futures in Interspecies Relations, in: Amalia Barboza, Mariel Rodriguez (ed.), Umwege / Detour. Künstlerische Wissenspraktiken als dekoloniale Strategien / Artistic Knowledge Practices as Decolonial Strategies, Heidelberg: arthistoricum.net 2025, pp.95-101, https://doi.org/10.11588/ar-thistoricum.1588.c22910

EMBODYING AN IDEA

Someone listening to a tree as attentive as if to the most exquisite music.
Tree Translator started with this image that came to my mind. I would have loved to witness that.

In 2018 I was supposed to write my PhD, when a Nomadways Residency in Southern France allowed me to take a break and try something new. That's when I took the step into the void to embody this image myself.

My academic background is in cultural studies. For many years, I have been working in the performing arts, mainly as a dramaturg, and as a visual practitioner, visualizing content und drawing protocols at events and lectures. Both include a lot of listening practice. The most valuable thing I have to offer, in both professions, is the direction of my focus. I know how a directed focus has the power to change a social setting and its space. So, I chose three ingredients from my artistic toolbox: I took the drawing kit I use when working as a graphic recorder, I took a device to keep a time frame, and I put on a pair of elf ears. It's quite a trashy prop developed for children, but it fit me – not to take myself too seriously – and worked as a theatrical reminder (to myself as well as potential audience) that some kind of non-ordinary listening might be called for.

Thus equipped, I went to a tree that had been attracting me, for my very first *Tree Translator* session. What I didn't expect was how my own perception – of trees, of myself, of what perceiving means – would transform once I took the time to give the tree my focus. (Fig. 1–3)

INTERSPECIES RELATIONS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

When I grew up in the West Germany of the 1980s and 1990s I loved trees. I would climb up into a pine tree to hide from other children and feel totally safe and protected between the branches that stretched out to build a perfect nest for my tiny body. Drawing a plum tree taught me to go beyond the limited green and brown as "typical" tree colors prescribed by kindergarten teach-

ers. My hands grabbed pencils from the full color spectrum as my eyes showed me endless shades of greens and browns as well as violet, red, silver-gray, or blue. Coming home sounded and smelled like the birch leaves in the wind in front of my parent's place.

However, the dominant worldview was hegemonically anthropocentric in a seemingly natural, unquestionable way. In the ongoing era of extractivist capitalism, trees have been categorized as objects, ready to be consumed for human profit or convenience. Accordingly, all those trees would be chopped down at some point: a construction site popped up in place of the pines. The plum bore no more fruit. The neighbor had allergies. I failed to do anything but watch the trees go. Yet, still as a grown-up it is in the branches of a tree, smelling the bark, listening to the sound of the leaves, and holding my body in a state of balanced tension, that I feel most at ease and alive. Climate change and ongoing structures of oppression and exploitation enhance the need for a radical shift in interspecies relations, especially for those of us who, like me, grew up into a *white*, western, capitalist, materialist and patriarchal dominant worldview. The kind of unlearning and cultural change that could enable a radical shift, calls – amongst other, parallel strategies – for rehearsal spaces in which to practice unlearning, caring, making kin and opening up to non-ordinary ways of listening. Listening, not to understand, but to learn. Unlearn, to be surprised, to let possible futures emerge.

The rehearsal space of the artistic research I named *Tree Translator*: listening to a tree as to the most beautiful piece of music and without the ambition to understand any kind of language, yet open to something not yet understandable to emerge, open to the possibility of translation anyhow. (Fig. 4)

→ Fig. 4:
Nora Haakh, *Tree Translator*, Try-Out, Nomadways Residency, Brivezac, 2018. Photo: İlker Abay. Courtesy of the author.

INSPIRATIONAL MYCELIA

Trees are social beings. They are interconnected by networks of fungi. So are ideas. *Tree Translator* keeps growing and transforming through encounters with trees and humans, experiences, and ideas. Unlike the myth of the solitary (and usually *white*, male) "genius" makes us believe, artistic work and research grow through a myriad of more or less transparent references, more or less conscious influences and more or less credited inspirations. When translated into markets of profitable commodity or status, prevalent power structures are bound to be reproduced.

This becomes problematic as capitalist, sexist and (post-) colonial power structures fuel the profit of some and simultaneously appropriate and silence rather than strengthen the voices of others. Unlearning power dynamics, shifting focus and repairing is an ongoing process. Even as I attempt to transform my forms of relating to my co-creatures, I cannot but acknowledge that, as a *white* European cultural scientist and artmaker, my own world-making and awareness of my inspirations must be full of biases and blind spots.

To visualize the intertextuality of *Tree Translator* I have built an adaptable sculpture. It includes portraits of humans who have influenced the artistic research. Sometimes I call it the "inspirational mycelia". Sometimes, I use it as an instrument for

→ Fig. 5:
Nora Haakh, *Kompliz*innen:* Suzanne Simard and Peter Wohlleben. Drawings and photo courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 6:
Nora Haakh, *Kompliz*innen*. Set-up detail „inspirational mycelia" as part of the performance *Tree Translator* by Nora Haakh, Fest der Puppen, Lingen/Ems, 2022. Drawings, sculpture: Nora Haakh. Photo © Heike Worthmann. Courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 7:
Nora Haakh with „inspirational mycelia" as part of the performance *Tree Translator. Conversations among trees* by Nora Haakh, funded by Fonds Darstellende Künste, Prinzessinnengärten, Berlin, 2021. Video Still İlker Abay. Courtesy of the author.

playing footnotes. Sometimes I refer to it as my *mindscape*. When I perform *Tree Translator* in public space, it is present. A pile of books and my fieldnotes are open for free engagement of the audience, too.

To name but a few: there are activists like the nobel peace prize awardee Wangari Maathai, who since the 1980s pointed to the potential of understanding, studying, analyzing tree relations for fostering, pushing forward, achieving climate justice as well as spiritual resilience (Maathai 2010, 9). There are biologists like Jagadis C. Bose and Monica Gagliano, whose experiments showcase plants' abilities to interconnect, sense and (re-)act (Bose 1926, Gagliano 2018) even though Bose's reception in the West seems to have been blocked at least partly by racism (cf. Minorsky 2020). There is Peter Wohlleben, whose books have acquainted most Germans with the idea that trees are linked underground through networks of fungi (Wohlleben 2015) and Suzanne Simard, who researched mycorrhizal fungi as well as the importance of the big "mother trees" in managing the underground exchange of resources and information (Simard 2021).

There is the magician and anthropologist Davin Abram who revisits western phenomenology in the frame of non-western, nature-relating shamanistic practices, one awe-inspiring illusion at a time (Abram 2021).

There are writers like Ursula K. LeGuin and Sumana Roy who poetically stretch the imaginable in plant relations and beyond (LeGuin 1972, Roy 2017), Robin Wall Kimmerer, who merges biological knowledge with first nation storytelling (Kimmerer 2013), or critical thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Kohei Saito that point out post- and neocolonial continuities and the urgency of unlearning in ecologies of worldmaking (Spivak 2008, Saito 2022).

There are artists, like Annette Arlander, who has been exploring and writing about "how to perform and cooperate with plants and especially trees in relation to working with the vegetal in various types of performances" (Arlander 2022, 18). The Choreographer Claudia Bosse, who showed me how she puts herself in an embodied relation with trees by translating the lines of the tree into movement, a practice she called "reading trees" (unpublished Interview with Claudia Bosse, 2021) or the visual artist Zheng Bo that I encountered during his interdisciplinary exhibition *Wanwu Council* in 2021 where he taught the audience a Qui Gong exercise to connect with trees (unpublished interview with Zheng Bo, 2021, see also Komornitzyk 2021).

There are some of the humans that I have worked, shared life and (over shorter or longer periods) mindscape-osmosed with, like the filmmaker İlker Abay, the dancer Natalie Riedelsheimer, the dramaturg Marie Yan, and many more. Some of them influenced this work in ways I can name. With others, our relations of co-creation escape the labels I have at my disposal, or I might not be aware of them at all. Meanwhile, the unseen mycel keeps growing, keeps interconnecting. (Fig. 5–7)

PRACTICES OF RELATING FOR (ARTISTIC) RESEARCH

Experiments to (un-)learn, kin-making and relating with a more-than-human environment are manifold and moving. In *Tree Translator* I employ performative and visual methods. Some of these are: Shifting Focus, Portraits, Sensing Space, Slowing down, Scribings.

SHIFTING FOCUS

Start from such a distance that allows you to grasp the size of the tree and its visible shape. See the tree. What is their relation to their surrounding? Are they part of some (patchwork) family of trees in the surrounding? What elements have been influencing them? For example, how does adaptation to human choices reflect in their growth? What other factors seem to be important to them? See the whole tree. What kind of a character vibe does the visible shape give you? What can you guess about what is invisible to your eyes, such as the underground rootwork or the pollen pathways?

PORTRAITS

From this distance, draw a portrait of the full visible body of the tree, inspired by what seminal painter Nandalal Bose (as quoted by Roy 2017, 39f.) suggested for drawing trees: in the same way as the tree grew, following the journey of each branch making its way from earth to sky.

SENSING SPACE

Stepping closer, try to sense exactly when you are crossing the threshold into this tree's personal space. Just like when you are visiting a not yet well-acquainted human in their home for the first time. Use the same ways of sensing into the unwritten rules: Is this a place where I should take off my shoes? How to greet, with a hug, a wink, a nod?

Mark your stepping into treespace by performing any kind of symbolic action that seems considerate and appropriate. What kind of a home is this? How does it make you feel? What other things that might be part of an encounter feel appropriate or interesting to try out?

(This kind of strategic anthropomorphism helps to shift focus from perceiving a tree as some background element in a human-centered scenery to facing a living creature.

After that, as a next step, it is helpful to remember the non-humanness of the tree. Getting closer through a zigzag of similarity and difference.)

SLOWING DOWN

An hourglass helps to keep focus on the tree for an allocated time. In solo practice, if I have enough time, I go for an hour. In participatory settings, the collective choice usually goes to sessions of five or ten minutes at a time.

→ Fig. 8:
Nora Haakh, *Tree Translator*, Try-Out, Narraction Residenz, Poudally 2021. Photo: Una Jovovic. Courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 9:
Nora Haakh, *Magnolia tree*, Bergen auf Rügen 2021. Courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 10:
Nora Haakh, *Magnolia tree: Portrait*, Bergen auf Rügen 2021, gouache and ink on paper. Drawing and photo courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 11:
Nora Haakh, *Magnolia tree: Scribing*, gouache on paper. Drawing and photo courtesy of Nora Haakh/Magnolia tree

→ Fig. 12:
Nora Haakh: "Tree Translator: Gingko. Porträt and Scribing", Berlin, 2021, ink, gouache, dried leaf on paper. Drawing and photo courtesy of the author.

SCRIBINGS

When close to the tree, give focus and sense into the space. Which senses do you employ? What do you hear with your ears? What do you perceive with any other sense? What kind of dynamics or relations are present around the tree, between you in the tree, or somewhere else in the social-ecological field you have entered? Use drawing to let something yet unknown emerge from the social field that is fed by your attention.

Kelvy Bird, one of my teachers, has named the approach when an artist "calls particular attention to an emerging reality that is brought to life by, and for, the social field in which it's created" as "generative scribing", which she considers a "social Art for the 21st Century (Bird 2018, 1).

Sometimes I call these scribings (in my broad understanding of the term) "translations". (Fig. 8–12)

TRANSLATING "TRANSLATION"

"Twenty Theses on Translation [... #1:] Nothing is translatable. [... # 20.] Everything is translatable." (Apter 2006, xi f.)

If there is some kind of communication between trees, can it be possible for a human to learn, let alone translate, tree language? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question if the subaltern can speak (or: what forms of expression might *not* be heard, read or otherwise deciphered) (Spivak 2008, 105) remains an unsettling reminder to reflect the limits of my own perception of—or projection on—the very other that a tree is to me. *Tree Translator* attempts partly "speculative fabulation" (Donna Haraway 2016, 10). It is also an ode to the work of translators, a practice of care and connection, that is often unseen yet crucial, courageously idealistic yet ultimately impossible. In my PhD I have worked on translation in creative processes, and the creative process as which translation emerges when we face the paradox that "[...] translation, after all, forges from two differences the *appearance* of equivalence [...]" (Tageldin 2011, 13). According to literary scholar Ferial Ghazoul, translation is a process of "becoming" that transforms both the translated and the translator (Ghazoul 2014, 376f.). The arabic term she proposes is *naql,* which contains the seemingly paradox that a translation "simultaneously becomes different and remains the same [...]" (Bassnett 2011, xiii) as well as pointing out the work of moving something to another place, work which needs time and resources. It is a kind of work that reminds to focus not only on what divides, but what steps can be tried out to find a possible connection (Haakh 2020, 32).

In *Tree Translator*, translation becomes code for the multitude of practices of focusing and relating that aim at transcending language and other borders. When "[t]ranslation is the language of planets and monsters" (Apter 2006, xi), stepping into the void and "dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn't there before" (Haraway 2016, 10) means navigating the dance of différance in complex "contact zones" (Pratt 1991, 31) regulated by obvious, overlooked, unseen and (yet?) ungraspable power(structure)s—lingering pasts, emerging futures and the "Knowing of the Field" (Scharmer/Pomeroy 2024, 19).

PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

Since 2018, *Tree Translator* has developed through research, encounters and practice. It has been performed as a solo practice. A series of encounters with tree-interested humans of various fields has been funded by Fonds Darstellende Künste (*Gespräche unter Bäumen*, 2021). It has been invited to festivals as a site-specific, participatory performance in public space, and has turned into lecture performance and workshop formats.

Whenever I get a chance to hold that space, audience, workshop participants or passers-by are invited to take an active part in the encounter with a specific tree in its socio-ecological, often urban context. They have been sharing their stories about childhood tree memories, cultural or spiritual practices and joining me to play with the tools I have been finding. And stepping into the void to embody their own ideas and let themselves be surprised by what emerges when you give the time to give a tree your focus. (Fig. 13–17)

→ Fig. 13:
Participants of the workshop *Tree Translator*, Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts, Berlin, 2023. Photo courtesy of Nora Haakh

→ Figs. 14 and 15:
Nora Haakh and participants of the Performance *Tree Translat*, Fest der Puppen, Lingen, 2022. Photo courtesy of the author.

→ Fig. 16:
Participants of the workshop *Tree Translator*, Narraction Residency, Poudally, 2021. Photos Una Jovovic.

→ Fig. 17:
Participants of the performance *Tree Translator. Conversations among trees* by Nora Haakh, Prinzessinnengärten, Berlin, 2021. Photo: İlker Abay.

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