MAKING WITH MULTISPECIES ART

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of multispecies art – referring to works made with, rather than of or about, more-than-human beings – in cultivating new ways of knowing, being, and doing, amid the ethico-political and ecological emergencies of the Anthropocene. Focusing on the curious, joyful and surprising encounters that multispecies art renders possible, my ongoing doctoral research builds on long-term collaboration with Finland-based multispecies artists, through a participatory research practice I call *making-with*. Drawing from a *love ethic* composed by feminist theorist bell hooks (2001), making-with builds on principles of care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge, from a multispecies perspective. Multispecies love ethic means living and working together without aiming to smooth out differences and remaining attentive to the otherness of the other. In these processes, alternative ways of knowing become essential. While western scientific tradition teaches us to observe other species from the vantage point of human exceptionalism, a multispecies approach seeks to learn from and with our more-than-human research partners. What could our companions teach us if we learned how to listen?

MAKING-WITH

This paper examines the political potential of *multispecies art* in cultivating new ways of knowing, being, and doing, crucial for "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) of the Anthropocene. By multispecies art, I refer to artistic projects that are committed to working with more-than-human beings, rather than reducing them to the plane of representation (Vepsä, 2022a; see also Boyd, 2015). Making art *with,* rather than *of* or *about* other species, challenges anthropocentric notions of mastery and agency in artistic processes, as well as interspecies relationships more broadly.

Art historian Katve-Kaisa Kontturi (2018) argues that the political potential of art is "not only inseparable from but synonymous with each work of art's unique material-relational movement, through which art suggests new ways of thinking and being" (p. 24). Following this potentiality, she states, demands a shift from the dominant field of representation towards the production of art and its material becoming: Instead of trying to find a so-called meaning behind a particular artwork through prefixed cultural interpretations and narratives, one should follow the way the work *works* in its singularity. In other words, the researcher should move with the work and open themselves to the possibility of both affecting and being affected. (pp. 9–13)

I follow Kontturi's suggestion in my approach to multispecies art. Rather than viewing works of art from the detached perspective of traditional research roles and hierarchies, where the object of interest is separated from the researcher, my research involves actively participating in the processes of art in the making. This entails long-term, extensive collaboration with artists and other human and more-than-human participants. Drawing from the various frameworks of *with-ness* developed particularly within feminist posthumanism and new materialisms (e.g., Chen, MacLeod & Neimanis, 2013; Haapalainen, 2020; Haraway, 2008, 2016; Kontturi, 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Ylirisku, 2021), I refer to this collaborative approach as *making-with*. Instead of a fixed method, making-with is a situated, material-affective process in which art and research merge in exploration, experimentation, and mutual learning. In this process, alternative, multispecies ways of knowing become essential.

As multispecies ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose (2013) has stated, when research is committed to ethical encounters between living, embodied beings, understanding depends on stories. In my view, multispecies art and research are modes of storytelling that can help one understand more-than-human worlds better and cultivate alternative ways of knowing-, being-, and doing-with. Next, I will share two short stories about encounters in multispecies art projects I have participated in within my ongoing doctoral research: a garden installation *Performative Habitats* (2021–) by artist Egle Oddo, and *Snout-Led Sensory Walk* (2024) by artist Oona Tikkaoja and her companion dogs, Whippets Pika and Spock. With these stories I examine the alternative, more-than-human ways of knowing that my work with these projects has taught me through reciprocal practices of love and learning.

PERFORMATIVE HABITATS

Egle Oddo's[5] *Evolutionary gardens* are living sculptures that function as spaces for encounters between plants, people, and other critters. In these gardens, the artist plants wild and cultivated species together, with the idea that, with time and space, they could naturally evolve, change, and drift, hopefully creating new biotic assemblages. Every garden is an ongoing process of multispecies entanglements, where plants, worms, insects, microbes, and other creatures take part in the becoming of the work. These gardens become protected areas for biodiversity and multispecies encounters beyond human mediation or interference. (Oddo & Adragna, 2022)

I first encountered one of Oddo's *Evolutionary gardens,* an installation called *Performative Habitats,* when I started my internship at the Mänttä Art Festival in May 2021.[6] As I have earlier described (Vepsä, 2022b), not much grew there yet that time of the year, and there was nothing extraordinary in the scene. But something drew me in immediately. So, when Oddo asked if I wanted to help her with the work, I rolled up my sleeves and "jumped right into that wormy pile", to borrow feminist theorist Donna Haraway's (2016, p. 32) words. As the spring hesitantly turned towards summer, my curiosity grew with the garden. Slowly, new plants started to appear, and I wanted to know all about them. So, I did what I was taught to do: I turned to books. I bought a bunch of botanical books and carried them with me to the garden. I kept asking Oddo the name of every new plant I encountered, and she answered my questions patiently. But I soon realised that she did not know everything either. She told me things like, "I do not remember the name, but this plant makes the most beautiful flowers", or "I do not know what it is called, but it is familiar to me, and I know what it needs." She invited me to smell the plants, to touch them, and observe their growth. But I kept reading the books. Old habits die hard.

5 Egle Oddo is an artist based in Helsinki, Finland, who is dedicated to long-term and context-based projects. Her work focuses on linear and non-linear narration as an art form. Interested in operational realism, meant as the presentation of the functional sphere in an aesthetic arrangement and its inter-relations, she combines photography, moving image, installation, sculpture, environmental art, and experimental live art. Oddo has been researching plant seeds, vegetal consciousness and agency, and plant imagery since 2007.
6 Mänttä Art Festival is an annual contemporary art exhibition in Mänttä-Vilppula, Central Finland.

Figure 1

Suvi Vepsä at Egle Oddo's site-specific installation Performative Habitats, August 2021. Photograph by Julia Räsänen

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass – Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants,* Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes a similar experience. As a botanist, she was trained to approach nature with the "reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective" tools of science (p. 42). This scientific worldview was, however, in conflict with the one she had grown up with. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she had been taught to embrace plants as our companions and oldest teachers. According to the indigenous understanding, Kimmerer explains, plants have been living on this planet much longer than we have and thus, they know a lot more than we do. Describing the experience of almost forgetting this at the beginning of her academic career, Kimmerer writes: "I was teaching the names of the plants and ignoring their songs" (p. 43).

I had not yet learned to listen to the songs of the plants. But eventually, my questions changed. I turned towards the plants, sat down to smell them, to touch them, to observe every detail. I felt the coldness of the ground underneath me and the warmth of the sun on my face. The garden would answer my questions in its own way, which, most of the time, is not obvious or immediate. I have known the garden for four years now, and the answer is still only forming. I am still reading the botanical books, to get to know my friends a little bit better. As Kimmerer (2013, pp. 252, 345) reminds us, science, too, can help us form intimacy and respect with other species. But that alone is not enough. Learning from and with the garden demands more caring knowledge, and care comes from somewhere else. It comes from paying attention, listening, and making-with.

Collecting information and gathering data without care, responsibility, and respect only reinforces the Western anthropocentric worldview of dominance and control (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 346). This is not only an issue of natural sciences. The humanities, too, were born into the same arrogance: the ideals of neutrality, objectivity, and rationality. As an art historian, I, too, must consciously learn to let go of the fantasy of knowing it all. Indeed, as curator Taru Elfving states in her essay with artist and researcher mirko nikolić (2018), writing with art in a more responsible and caring way, that is, in a way that decentres the human-researcher as a subject of mastery and control, requires not-knowing. It requires "responding to the persistence of unknowability and holding onto the wonder that precedes attempts at understanding" (p. 31). The biggest thing I have learned from the garden is to be patient, to accept the limits of my knowledge and perception, and to remain curious. My focus is no longer on the meaning of it all, but the feeling of it all: being, learning, and making-with the garden. I have carried this knowledge outside the garden, too. Now, whenever I encounter a species new to me, I greet them with curiosity: "Who are you, and what do you wish to tell me?"

SNOUT-LED SENSORY WALKS

In the fall of 2024, I took part in artist Oona Tikkaoja's [7] multispecies art course *Kuljeskelutaidetta koiran kanssa*[8], which took place in a small urban forest in Turku, Finland. The course was comprised of three meetings with Tikkaoja, Whippets Pika and Spock, and four

7 Oona Tikkaoja, based in Turku, Finland, is an artist, pedagogue, and animal-assisted coach interested in working with diverse people and animals. Her practice includes different forms of public and social art. In her multispecies art projects, she collaborates with her companion animals – Whippets Pika, Spock and Lelle, Finn horse Valo, and Shetland pony Iitu – offering open art courses to various people under the name *Kulttuurieläin* ("Animal of Culture").

8 The name could be translated as *The Art of Wandering, With Dogs.*

human participants. The meetings focused around exercises called *Snout-Led Sensory Walks*, which Tikkaoja (2024) describes as follows:

> The human participants let the dog guide them around the area. They observe where the dog takes them and consider what is interesting from the dog's point of view. If there are several dogs, they are assigned to the participants. This brings a new layer, as we can observe their mutual choices of direction and pace. Humans are not allowed to talk during the walk because that would disturb their concentration. The length of the walk can be anything. I have noticed that 20 minutes is proper for concentration. (p. 19, tr. SV)

Tikkaoja defines this exercise as an observational play between people and dogs, based on different senses. By offering both an opportunity to step out of their habitual ways of understanding time and space, the exercise encourages creativity and activates a potential for alternative ways of moving, sensing, and knowing with the environment.

Figure 2

Pika and Spock at Oona Tikkaoja's Snout-Led Sensory Walk, September 2024.

The following text is an excerpt from my research diary (2024), describing the first meeting of the course:

> Following the dogs is not always easy. They do not understand that our bodies are different, that it is harder to climb the hills with two legs and slippery shoes instead of four sets of claws. I try to be careful not to slip and fall on the wet rocks that the dogs hop on and off so effortlessly. Like the dogs, I keep my gaze tightly on the ground, losing all visual coordinates.
>
> We drift off the paths often, pressing our footmarks in the untouched softness of the ground. The low-hanging spruce branches that the dogs pass under without trouble whack me in the face if I do not bend my body into weird positions to dodge them. The softness of the forest floor has absorbed rain like a sponge, my body shivers as its coldness seeps through my shoes.
>
> I pick up a pile of moss detached from a rock Spock was smelling a second ago and wonder what the dog knows that I do not.

This very short exercise already changed the way I experienced the forest. Since movement is a significant part of how we perceive our environment, following the footsteps of Pika and Spock gave me a glimpse of a different perspective. Because walking on an uneven, slippery ground required me to look carefully where I step, the information I gained from my surroundings was based mostly on hearing, touch and smell. Humans tend to prioritise vision over other senses, so having to walk with my eyes on the ground pushed me towards unhabitual ways of experiencing the environment. As my notes show, such a shift can open one up to new ways of knowing but also take them to the limits of their knowledge. Similarly to the case of *Performative Habitats,* here, too, I faced the wonder of more-than-human worlds out of my reach.

In his book *The Wake of Crows – Living and Dying in Shared Worlds,* environmental philosopher Thom van Dooren (2019, p. 8) emphasises the plurality of more-than-human worlds. He argues that all of us, humans and nonhumans, as individuals and collectives, inhabit and share multiple worlds that collide, enmesh and interact, but always only partially. To talk about worlds in plural, van Dooren states, dismantles the western understanding of objective and unchanging reality. Although we are all entangled in one way or another, the ways humans experience and make sense of the world differ from the ways dogs do, and our experiences differ a lot from those of plants, for example. Multispecies art is a creative way to map the *contact zones* – a term used by Donna Haraway (2008) – between these worlds.

MULTISPECIES LOVE ETHIC

These little stories about multispecies art practices show that being, doing and knowing are inseparably intertwined with each other and, as feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2007, p. 185) states, also inherently connected to ethics. Making-with exemplifies this kind of ethico-onto-epistemology, where theoretical knowledge is produced in and entangles with practical, affective encounters. Universal moral principles do not work here: ethical questions must be negotiated in situated practices of response-ability. Who do I truly encounter when I encounter this being? What does this encounter mean for both of us, and what does it demand from us? To approach these questions, I have turned to the material-affective politics of a practice called *multispecies love ethic*.

In her book *All About Love*, feminist theorist bell hooks (2001, pp. 4–5, 76, 94) calls for a *love ethic* as a guiding principle to transform our relationships with each other and the world. In her quest to demystify love for more sustainable interpersonal and societal relationships, hooks argues for an understanding of love as intentional action that entails care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect and knowledge. As hooks reminds, living by love ethic is not only private action, but a collective, political one, that carries the potential to dismantle structures of domination and oppression. In their collaborative writing, philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have reached a similar conclusion, arguing for the reintroduction of love into political action and theory. In their book *Commonwealth,* Hardt and Negri (2009) describe love as "an ontological event, in that it marks a rupture with what exists, and the creation of the new" (p. 181). They see love as a transformative power that produces new subjectivities, new societies, and new worlds.

While the abovementioned writers focus mainly on human relationships, their arguments for love can, in my view, be extended also to multispecies relationships. Philosopher Vinciane Despret (2004) has written about love as a shared experience between multispecies partners in research, stating that learning to love and care for one another is not the result, but the condition for good science. According to Despret, loving the more-than-human beings we work with means recognising them as subjects in encounter rather than as objects of our action and observation. This realisation inevitably comes with the understanding of the unconquerable otherness of the other: something always remains out of our reach. As Haraway (2003, pp. 48–49) writes in *Companion Species Manifesto*, the recognition of difference, not as a mute barrier, but as an invitation to become curious about the other, is the key to all ethical relating in multispecies relationships. In their conceptualisation of love as political power, Hardt and Negri (2009, pp. 182–184) also emphasise this aspect: according to them, a good, ethical love should always aspire to proliferate differences, not dismantle them.

It is precisely here where the transformative ethico-political power of love lies: in reaching towards difference, and a willingness to learn. That is, a willingness to be changed in an encounter with the other, through practices of care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. As I have shown, multispecies art can become a platform for such

learning: creating and testing new ways of knowing, being, and doing. Curiosity – the desire to know more about the other, with the recognition that this knowledge will always remain partial – is the driving force of making with multispecies art.

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