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Wilding performance

ABSTRACT

These Artist Pages are a response to the question, 'how can a performance practice be ecological?' By critically reflecting on a recent performance project, Wild Life, I conceptualise a 'wilding performance practice'. I suggest an ecological ethics arises by attending to performance as an ongoing entanglement of human and non-human wills and trajectories.

What follows is a response to the question, 'how can a performance practice be ecological?' – a question I am exploring in my practice-led Ph.D.¹ Through a recent performance project, *Wild Life*, I am developing a notion of 'wilding performance', envisaging an ecological ethics of practice to arise in a wilding approach. With *Wild Life* I discovered a generative tension between the container-ship of the 'performance' frame, and wilding – where 'wild' suggests something unruly, self-willed and less contained (Griffiths 2006: 49; Bekoff 2014: 10). My use of wilding signals a similarity and difference to the concept of 'rewilding' used in European land management, which refers to human interventions aimed at restoring 'spontaneous processes' to ecological systems (Monbiot 2013: 8). I explore performance-making using rewilding ideas in an 'eco-imaginative thought experiment' (Kershaw 2007: 245) aimed towards disseminating an ethical thinking and doing ecology in performance.

KEYWORDS

ecology
performance
wilding
rewilding
intergenerational
non-professional
performers
non-human

1. My Ph.D. is with the University of Glasgow and Catherine Wheels Theatre Company. It is funded through the AHRC's Collaborative Doctoral Award Scheme and began in October 2012.

WILD LIFE

I worked with an ensemble of people between 9 and 60 years old over three months, directing them in a new co-devised performance, *Wild Life*. The piece is a choreography, meditation and celebration of wildness – the creative process and performance unravelling as an exploration and embodiment of what wildness might be. Like ‘nature’, ‘wildness’ is contestable, and I was motivated to work with children and adults, professionals and non-professionals, and non-human materials in order to explore the diversity and complexity of the concept. *Wild Life* was first performed publicly in November 2014 at Platform – a theatre venue in Easterhouse in Glasgow – to audiences of school, youth and adult groups, families and artists. It will be remounted in spring 2016 and shown in various venues and schools in Scotland.

REWILDING

In contemporary Europe rewilding refers to human interventions aimed at restoring resilience and biodiversity to ecosystems (Monbiot 2013: 8). Rewilding concerns ecosystem management (by humans) in order to eventually un-manage and let those systems go in their own (non-human dominated) direction – it is the ‘human touch to erase the human touch’ (Hall 2014: 30). This usefully problematizes notions of preserving a fixed ‘nature’ or the ‘wild’, challenging predominant conservation agendas (Bekoff 2014: 9). The goal of humans ‘letting go of’ ecosystems is, however, problematic.



Figure 1: Photo credit: Daisy Douglas.

It assumes humans are able to ‘hold on to’ and ‘control’ ecosystems in the first place. Moreover, to speak of human retraction from ecosystems implies humans have a choice to step into or out of ecologies. This suggests a privileged vantage point separate from, or above, ‘nature’. Some recent rewilding literature helpfully proposes human re-involvement in, rather than retraction from, ecological systems (Jørgensen 2015: 5; Monbiot 2013: 11). This is useful for articulating wilding because it begins to entertain less binary human–non-human and culture–nature perspectives. Questions then arise about the qualities and dynamics of humans’ inevitable involvement in ecosystems. This allows me to explore performance ‘containers’ as potentially ethical wilding strategies for performance ecologies.

CONTAINERS FOR WILDNESS

In the process of making *Wild Life*, I offered instructional containers for improvisations that involved one, some or all performers interacting with non-human materials (stones, buckets, water, matches). I give Carragh (aged 9) these: ‘Wash, tap, slide, and make a circle with stones’.

After watching this, another member of the ensemble – Graham (aged 51) – reflected that, at first, he could see the rules and boundaries Carragh was following – for example, she was washing each stone. Soon,



Figures 2–5: Photo credit: Val Hopfinger.



Figures 6–9: Photo credit: Daisy Douglas.

however, she seemed to follow logics and impulses he could not identify: she was spontaneously tapping, placing, sliding, watching stones. He could not see the boundaries anymore, yet Carragh remained faithful to the instructions. Unpredictable movements emerged, produced by yet going beyond the container of my instructions.

The container of rules implicitly demand Carragh to make spontaneous embodied choices – her performance arising *in* her negotiations between the known rules and the unknown of her improvisatory enactments through those rules. Furthermore, her will and choices seemed to arise *through* the ‘vibrancy’ and ‘agency’ (Bennett 2010) of the stones – materials that were both part of and recalcitrant to her actions. For example, she would slide a stone across the floor; it would go further than she thought, or bash into stones she had previously made into a circle. This unpredicted event caused Carragh to run and retrieve the stone or mend the circle, producing unique improvisatory qualities to her movements. In these moments, the performances of both Carragh and stones seemed to transgress the container, producing movements of child and stone unmanaged by my (human adult) directives.

What led the performance became less and less clear – it was, I think, a performance arising from the collaboration and collision of human and non-human wills. The stones performed as much as Carragh – both were directing, and directed by, each other. The instructional boundaries I set arguably allowed Carragh and stones to enact, and be exposed as, willful and agential.



Figures 10–13: Photo credit: Daisy Douglas.

In rewilding practices, the fences (or containers) erected necessarily contain in their making their potential to be transgressed: that is, their impermanence *allows* rewilding. For example, an initiative by ‘Rewilding Europe’ to rewild bison in a particular region of Romania is described as not simply about releasing the bison into ecosystems but rather as a ten-year process where fences are needed to create a ‘recovery and acclimatization’ zone where the bison learn survival skills, and then, in a further year’s time, the fences are taken down and the bison released (Vlasakker 2014: 14). This process *needs* the fences to contain the bison, and *needs* the bison to eventually transgress those fences. This rewilding strategy echoes the wilding performance process of constructing boundaries that contain their own potential to be ruptured and transgressed by the (human and non-human) wills involved. In the Carragh-stones-water performance, the human-made container of instructions arguably enabled her and the non-human dispositions to, as it were, express their variegated wills and thus go beyond the container. Wilding performance is performance that ruptures itself – the agency of the performance ecology arising between and across the humans and non-humans involved. My directing became about participating in this performance ecology of humans and non-humans – I managed people and materials in order to un-manage them.

The liveness of performance seems to implicitly relate these wilding ideas. It was Carragh’s *live* spontaneous enactments through the human-made rules



Figures 14–15: Photo credit: Daisy Douglas.

that any wildness arose in her and the materials. Live performance arguably embodies the constant letting go and abandonment of fixed states: even as rules, images and specific identities form, they are always already changing into something else. I observe Carragh sitting counting out stones, suggesting to me an image of 'the child'.

Almost immediately, however, she has suddenly moved her body in an unexpected way in order to gather stones that have escaped the bucket as she pours them out. She appears outside of my 'child' labels for her through this not-easy-to-recognize movement response to the stones, making the stones appear less recognizable too. Her interaction with the recalcitrant stones seems to cause my fixed construction of 'child' and 'stone' to dissolve. Perhaps performance offers itself as a wilding strategy because it can allow (human and non-human) selves to go beyond their (humanly) contained or constructed 'selves'? Yet, performance per se is not necessarily wilding. Rather, practices evolving from an understanding of human and non-human materialities as willful agents might allow ecologically ethical performances of wildness to emerge. Performance could uniquely offer a live *instance* of an ethical ecological way of being in the world by being produced through, and exposing of, the interweaving of human and non-human. Performance, then, becomes wild, not by its representations of 'wildness' or 'nature', but by its very live agential enactments of human-non-human wills.

The images interspersed throughout this piece of writing are from the live performance of *Wild Life*. Rather than look upon them as fixed things, I invite you to 'join with' (Ingold 2011: 88) them in a shared ethical effort to continue *wilding* our thoughts about what the wilding of performance might be.

To find out more about *Wild Life* and my other work, please visit www.sarahhopfinger.org.uk

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

I am a researcher and artist, currently in my third year of an AHRC-funded practice-led Ph.D. with the University of Glasgow. My practice sits between choreography, live art, and contemporary performance, and focuses on the relations and collaborations between those involved. Past work includes *Age-Old*, a performance I co-created with a 7-year-old girl, and *Small is Beautiful* which was a collaboration with my mother. I envisage my practice as ecological not in terms of communicating environmental issues but as a practice that explores, embodies and evolves through the reality of our inter-connection within ecology.

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