

Metode

Between ants, humans, disciplinaries and worldviews: creating a performative work from an interdisciplinary starting-point

Between ants, humans, disciplinaries and worldviews: creating a performative work from an interdisciplinary starting-point

By Christine Fentz

Ants developed from wasplike foremothers 100 million years ago and 50 million years ago the ants began farming. At that time, they were present on almost all continents. The Neanderthals – as far as we know by now – did not farm the land in our traditional sense and Homo Sapiens – us – began farming approximately 10.000 years ago.

This quote is from Secret Hotel's performance *Walking Lecture on Ants* (2017) and despite its scientific facts and style it is delivered by one of the performing artists. It serves as an apt way of introducing this article's primary focus: the interdisciplinary aspects of creating the piece. This process encompassed not only the meetings between our various disciplines/professions but also the worldviews we each carried into the working sphere.

My article will employ text and photos to take you through a number of our work sessions and share considerations about work methods, worldviews, and prisms.

Secret Hotel and the processes behind *Walking Lecture on Ants*

Secret Hotel specializes in participatory work with a focus on multispecies: the more-than-human creatures and entities on this planet. Christine – your author here – is the artistic director. For many years, we have created performances for audiences of almost all ages, and since 2008 we have focused on the wider world, of which we humans are a mere part, thereby engaging with the multispecies reality of the planet. At present, we are developing *Banquet for Bees* which will be the second piece in our series of walking lectures. Our focus on the interactions with other species is a way of highlighting the richness of animistic worldviews.¹ This interest also entails a need to work with experts from fields other than performing arts.

Our series of walking lecture performances began with *Walking Lecture on Ants*² (the performance underpinning this article). This was a participatory work developed as an interdisciplinary collaboration between the following persons and professions:

Hans Joachim Offenberg – biologist and ant researcher

Andreas Roepstorff – anthropologist & brain researcher

Betina Birkjær – performing artist

Christine Fentz – performing artist and director

Maiken Vibe Bauer – chemist and sound artist.

2) *Walking Lecture on Ants* was introduced during Aarhus Cultural Capital 2017's site specific & participatory performing arts festival *Little Rebellions* in August 2017. It premiered at Folkeuniversitetets *Hearts & Minds Festival* during September of the same year. Various versions have since been performed at different occasions and sites, mostly in Denmark; but it was also performed in Budapest in early October 2019.



*The team: from left Betina; Lotus Lykke Skov (production manager); Andreas; John Tinning (technician/university intern/and much more); Maiken Vibe; Christine; Joachim.
Photo: Foxcut/Rasmus Reimer*

Our combined creation offers audience members an immersive and participatory experience which journeys into the world of ants. Approximately 40 persons wear the same white, full-body outfits as the performers and researchers and are taken on a walk through the park and local area, learning about deep time, the evolution of ants and their world, communication in the world of ants, and the world of humans. Participants are given assignments, play games, and each meet a live ant close-up.

Secret Hotel views our audience members as ‘guests’, and we address them as such. Since our guests in this piece wear outfits identical to those worn by the performers, and since they carry out assignments, it could be argued that the audience also performs. This would certainly be the impression formed by passersby in the park. Through creating sensory experiences that are not typically the human way of sensing, we hope that the audience members ‘taste’ unknown perceptions and expand their understanding of non-human life forms while they, as a group, perhaps turn more and more into a small ant colony themselves.

Short outline of the process

The performance was created over a period of approximately ten months between December-May and August-September 2017. Throughout this time, though, there were only a few rehearsal periods and a handful of test runs. The whole team of five persons met seven or ten times. In addition, the co-creator & co-performer Betina and I worked another three weeks in all – spread out in sessions of two to five days during spring and summer, and always placed before the dates

when we all gathered and had test runs. From April to June we conducted six test runs with guests/audience. In between were periods in which research was done, text was refined, sound was created, the props and costumes were found and created, possible locations were scouted, and plans were made for how the live ants could be part of the performance parallel to all the normal production activities.



*Guests led by Betina in the Botanical Gardens in Aarhus, August 2017, towards the tree mentioned later in the text.
Photo: Lotus Lykke Skov*

For some aspects of the piece, we did a lot of preparation by talking and thinking through things that eventually would need testing. Regarding the performative and participatory elements, we used a ‘traditional’ approach in line with devised performing arts, trying elements repeatedly – thinking, changing, trying again, and writing down the elements of the eventual manuscript as we moved forward. In this way, the performative elements of the work were well-worked through. In a daunting contrast to this, the elements delivered by the researchers were more like blocs of information at the beginning. We could re-work the texts ourselves or ask the two scientists to edit, but we could not do many repeated tests. The differing realities confronted in the performing arts and the science spheres involve essential differences in ways time is distributed, negotiated, and prioritized. Hence, the participating scientists simply could not allocate the time – and this presented the first practical challenge in our interdisciplinary meeting.

With only a few working periods available, the artists and the production team of Secret Hotel did not have time with the researchers to really delve deeper into an idea and its elements in the ways we were used to from performing arts. Instead, we had to set up another progression for creating the piece. Our starting point, therefore, became the running of small tests of concrete

actions (having decided beforehand what to try out, and in what order). This process involved a mix of known and improvised texts and actions. Throughout this process, a concrete part of my job as a director was to make the members of our interdisciplinary team work together, and this partly consisted of placing offerings from each contributor side by side, with equal value – so that each unit could exist in its own right, more or less affected by my decisions about composition – and this collage-approach would eventually create new units.

Luckily, our process was characterized by a high level of trust and playfulness even when the researchers often did not know where we were ‘going’ with the things we tried out together.³

A starting point: seeing each other as unknown prisms

When working across different disciplines, the most exciting part is also the central challenge: namely, the effort required from each participant to genuinely try to leave their own methodological comfort zone, thereby engaging in the unknown sphere of making new work with persons and professional fields they have only just met.

Each person partaking in a collaboration can have her opinions affected by knowing the central processes of the other working cultures involved. In this way, we can perhaps more easily understand each other. In my opinion, Gadamer’s merging of horizons (Gadamer 1998: 302) is an ideal to pursue when working inter-disciplines. This refers to Gadamer’s rendering of the hermeneutic circle: each of us are trying to understand the world around us from our specific point of reference: our ‘situation’. From here, we each perform actions of trying-to-understand, which are always affected by our preconceptions. This shapes the horizon we each have. If we want to learn more and expand our knowledge – as the metaphor goes, to expand our horizon – we need to widen our ideas and notions, subject them to change, and maintain a conceptual elasticity. When we manage to acknowledge our preconceptions and the limitations of our own horizon – curiously opening ourselves to the unknown reality of the other – a chance arises for horizons to expand or merge. Perhaps this can also prevent stagnation in the terminology and methods used in each of our fields of expertise? Just as the lenses of the human eye tend to stagnate with age, so can our professional lenses or methodological approaches become stiff and automatic. Moving into an unknown sphere of encounters can perhaps change this.

Theoretically, it is possible to invite people from different disciplines to create work together without defining the frame for the results. Then perhaps a true inter-, cross-, multi- or transdisciplinary work would emerge, but most often a lot of time would be spent on talking about definitions and on trial and error; it would mean constantly negotiating the symmetry of the power structures present. Instead, our invitation for the art-work had the scope of creating a performing arts version of Secret Hotel’s concept ‘walking lecture’. So, the format of the experience which our guests would meet was already defined, and the power of decisions was placed in the framework of performing arts.

But how to work together from such a starting point? How to begin the work, while harbouring

3) My long-time practice of artistic research means I am constantly conscious of switching between being immersed in the work and distancing myself from it with a critical viewpoint. This mental movement, I would claim, is active amid almost any kind of artistic working processes. It could be argued that the artistic research element mostly emerges in what happens next: in the dissemination. But this is a topic warranting a discussion of its own, which would run as deep as definitions of Artistic Research outside Denmark and within the Danish state systems. Nevertheless, the process of writing an article about the work process has (again) clearly shown me how limited it is – for me – to disseminate more-than-verbal experiences and insights in writing.

different perspectives on the world, on work processes, and on methods? We had agreed we were making a walking lecture whatever that format – coined by me – might mean. My wish to share perspectives on the ants other than exclusively human ones (merely *observing* them) was also communicated. Had my collaborators only been interested in the walking lecture format and not in the possibly new perspectives on the subject matter, I believe they would not have entered this unknown sphere of interest. Since I was the person with the power to make the final decisions, it was therefore also my world view that – presumably – was going to be the one permeating or dominating the final piece. But getting there, of course, takes negotiation through work.

As suggested by a very experienced scholar in interdisciplinary endeavours, anthropologist Anna Tsing, our *Walking Lecture on Ants* could be defined as “interdisciplinary” rather than, for instance, as “cross-disciplinary”.⁴ Tsing’s definition of interdisciplinarity involves each partner having a genuine interest both in the success of the project and in the as-yet-unknown territory of their collaborators. Personally, I am interested in how I can challenge and expand my own working processes, partly through encounters with people from walks of life beyond performing arts. But in order to do such a potentially uncontrollable thing as entering an unknown sphere – where one may be altered – genuine interest is needed.

So, my point of departure was one based on seeking and nurturing the challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration, as well as wanting to offer our guests other perspectives than the ones dominant in our Western culture – all in a coherent performative format. On the axis of defining a frame for (some of) the outcome, the clear decision of making a theatre piece was guiding us. Of course, how much each of us would be able to merge and widen our horizon was at this point still unclear.

When I work with offering insight into more-than-human perceptions (grass, trees, bees), it is partly because I want to find ways which might push us to try and think and perceive outside our own well-known paradigms. Concretely, this can be done through the senses, by trying out other lenses or prisms for how we (we: Humans of the Western world) perceive the world. This urge is an abiding theme in the work of *Secret Hotel*. The playful rendering of how the perceptions of other species and entities might be offers a prism for possible new experiences. At our very first work meeting, in the bleak December of 2016, one of the things we tested was to perform for a tree or let the tree perform for you.⁵

Recently, the hegemonic aspects of Western thinking which *Secret Hotel* performances seek to challenge were framed very precisely in a debate between the two anthropological grand dames Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway:

I want to nurture—to somehow force, if necessary—the attachment sites and contact zones so that all of the players have to somehow learn each other’s idioms in a way that changes everybody so that no one remains the same as they were at the beginning and can perhaps find more collaborative, decolonial ways to address urgent problems. Often, Indigenous people are forced to learn southern idioms, but the reverse is much less true. That is not tolerable (Mitman 2019).

4) From live talks with anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and from her participation in *Secret Hotel*’s symposium *EARTHBOUND*, September 2018. Tsing held a five-year Niels Bohr professorship, leading the interdisciplinary AURA – Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene together with Nils Bubandt.

5) An exercise I often use and one that I owe to Finnish scholar and artist Tuija Kokkonen.



Andreas and a birch tree. He writes about this in his article “At tale med træer; en øvelse i perspektivering”.

Photo: C Fentz

Below is a glimpse into the second work meeting that our team held.

Inviting confusion

A full day’s work was scheduled at our residency centre in Mols⁶ only a few days into the new year of 2017. It had snowed massively the evening and night before and we sat in our atelier flat, with a fire burning in the stove, looking out at the sleeping winter landscape of beautiful hills, trying to envision how to create a walk in a summery park. The people present were the ant researcher, the sound artist, our participatory researcher, a colleague functioning as consultant, and myself.⁷

Our conversation journeyed through the nerdy and stimulating field of the chemical mixings in the pheromone communication of ants. They communicate via smell, being sent out in densities with different temporalities; some move fast others linger for a long time. Our sound artist Maiken is also educated as a chemist, so the ant researcher Joachim and Maiken sometimes ventured far down alleys where the rest of us could not join. At these times, we called out for them to ‘return’ and asked for ‘translations’ so that the rest of us – lacking the knowledge through which they understood each other – might get a better idea of what they were talking about.

6) For some years, Secret Hotel has run residency activities at Christine’s farm in the village of Bogens situated in the Mols Bjerge National Park outside Aarhus. As of 2019, we are creating a new organisation for this: Earthwise Residency Center.

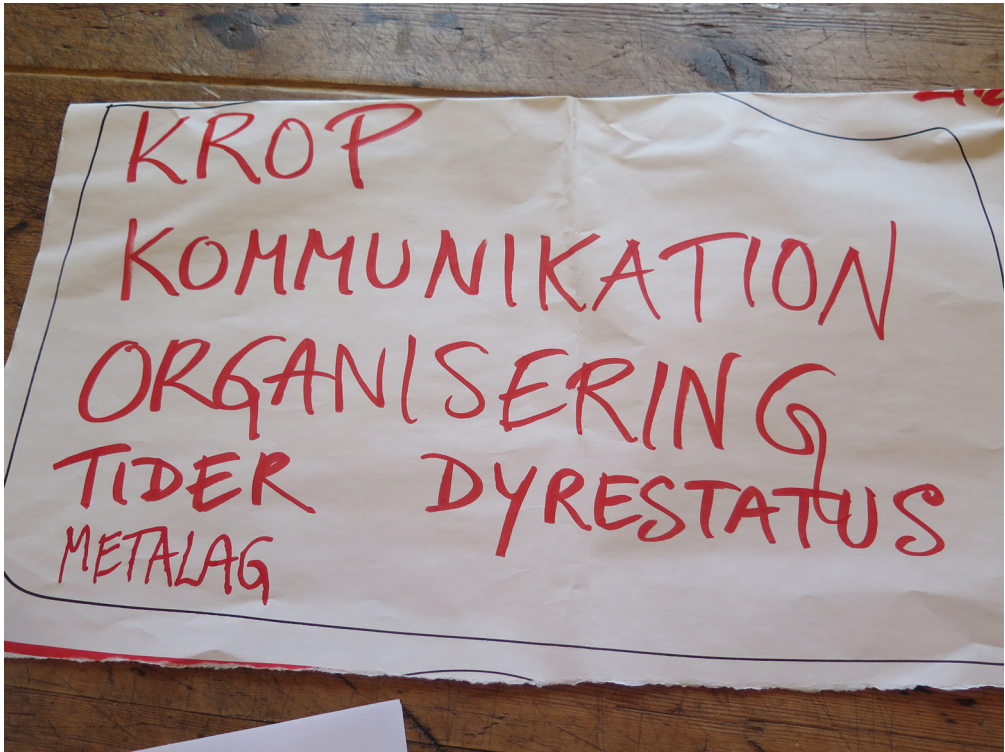
7) Participatory researcher Thomas Rosendal Nielsen, and performing artist Mette Aakjær, AD of Wunderland. The other performing artist and the anthropologist had both been forced to cancel this meeting.



Some of those present when preparing for the first test run in the snowy hills: Mette, Joachim, Thomas, and Maiken at the back.

Photo: C Fentz

Why did we not just listen and grasp whatever we managed to when the biologist and the chemist wandered off on roads inaccessible to the rest of us? Why did I want to understand their talk? After all, these exchanges between two disciplines were exactly what I was interested in. But in order to be able to possibly transform some of it into artistic abstractions, I also needed to follow and understand more than just a bit of the journey in the exchange. A person speaking their own lingo must attempt to break down various notions into language elements that we, their non-colleagues, can perhaps understand partially. This approach is much more rich, confusing, and informative than only being served what could be called the easily understandable ‘results’. And such richness, including confusion, is what artistic ideas, choices, and realizations can be born out of. I believe we also need to be lost to some extent during the process. It is partly this way that I find the elements, hunches, and concrete ideas that become performing art abstractions and transformations of the concrete scientific material we work with. It is through confusion and my own attempts to understand, that metaphors and bodily reactions become some of the motors in finding other lenses or prisms to offer to our guests. This approach demands a strategy of patience as well as of course accepting confusion as we dabble with our own terminologies and those of others.



A huge flipboard note from late winter '17 with the thematic threads – all of which eventually got unfolded in the piece: Body. Communication. Organizing. Times/temporalities. Animal status. Meta-layers. The status of animals became an interesting topic, though not one which found space in this article.

Photo: C Fentz

A first journey in snow – a first test run and a first audience

After our crash course in the chemistry of ant communication,⁸ ant researcher Joachim told us the basics about ants, their life cycles, gendering, their hibernation due to being ectothermic, and so forth. I imagine that we all thought about the frozen, local ant hills hibernating underneath the thick snow cover in the landscape outside the panoramic windows. And indeed, we also ventured out to be close to them. Knowing from experience that talking too much can delay us in entering the space of trying-out-testing-failing with ease and an open mind, my plan was to do a very first concrete try-out in the snowy hills. Even when both researchers are experienced top-class disseminators, they – like us, the theatre people – have a natural awkwardness when entering a new sphere, context, or group. Since we all knew that we were moving onto an unknown dance floor, and only half of us were shaped by the discipline of theatre rehearsals, a lot of different energies were present. So, a concrete strategy for the interdisciplinary collaboration was to make a hands-on

8) Did you know that the quanta, which the more or less blind ants mix their communication chemicals in, are so small that the scientists have a hard time copying it? Lab technicians end up almost drowning the ants in huge 'shouting' messages, because we – despite modern lab technology – cannot work in such small quantities as the ants do.

test even this early in the process. And our first test run also contained what is perhaps the scariest element of performing: an audience! I decided to embrace having an audience this early in the process because when creating participatory work, test audiences are regularly needed. You cannot operate by only imagining how people, your guests, will react, interact, and so forth. Hence, at our second work meeting, when we did a test run with guests from outside our production, it was partly because these persons were present as a result of serendipity. *Augustine Collective* (with their own take on interdisciplinary performances) had a two week residency over New Year at my home in Mols, and so we had five willing test guests.

At this first, crisp try-out in the snow, our five guests were introduced to basic facts of the Anthropocene – the present epoch where the actions of mankind are a geological factor – after which they were taken or talked through perspectives on temporalities or deep time. This covered the planet's coming into being, the development of the ant species, the five mass extinctions – the fifth being the one wiping out the dinosaurs but not the ants – and so forth. After some walking in the snow, they heard facts about hibernating ants from Joachim and listened to ant recordings from our sound designer. After some more meditative snow walking, they were given an assignment of passing on distributed pebbles and cones within the circle formed by the eleven of us: representations of both 'nature' and of the increasing global transport of microorganisms.⁹

In the final ant piece these storytelling aspects of the Anthropocene and the notions behind the concrete pebbles and cones are present almost only as imprints. With closed eyes, the guests are guided through a sound meditation of different temporalities (from mountain range time, through to silly season – 'agurketid' – to insect time), while sound art made from recordings of ants is played on three small loudspeakers carried around by the group of 40 guests. Mention of the Anthropocene is downplayed, and instead the intro text, still focusing on temporalities and deep time, uses farming as a way to show the time perspectives between ants, humans, and different types of interactions with land.¹⁰ The non-human perspectives of deep time are designed to help lift the guests out of their quotidian state of mind.

Our first rehearsal on the so-called 'floor' was also our very first test run. It could seem like a daring choice, but this way we acquired hands-on experience to share – of how it is to walk, to talk, to 'serve' something to guests, to try out things, and to listen to and be aware of the 'orchestra' that our group is during the performance. It was also a test for me as a director, a chance to see how each member of the team engaged with guests, and with each other, under a bit of stress. Last (but not least) it was also an important yet protected experience for those team members who had never 'delivered' a participatory performing arts piece before. This walk in the deep snow became a mutual reference point of experience that was valuable for our collaboration.

9) Cones and pebbles – passed on at an ever-accelerating speed – represented both the first paths of humanoid migration, as well as the Anthropocene acceleration, and this and the text used contained some of the same messages that we also wanted to work with. Hence, this use of 'old' material in the first test run. Half a year earlier, I had made an artistic contribution to the Aarhus Municipal Theatre Citizen's Stage's Anthropocene Dinner Event, a participatory response to central aspects of Elisabeth Kolbert's book: *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Company, 2014.

10) Kolbert describes how the Neanderthals seemed to have lived peacefully side by side with the megafauna for around 100 000 years. It took *Homo Sapiens* only ten thousand years, or even less, to hunt them all down. This is something we only hint at in the piece; see the quote at the start of this essay.



The snow-covered landscape.

Photo: C Fentz

The snow-covered hills also functioned as a type of sensory lens for the whole session. The magic of how the landscape was radically changed, and how we all inevitably revisited sensory experiences from snow-winters of childhood, seemed to place us all in a sphere of in-between. This became a place where perhaps more things were possible than when walking on the hard and very concrete surface of soil or asphalt; a fairytale-like space, where each step happened in the sound-muffling crunching of the soft snow. The snow functioned as a concrete alteration of our bodies so that we became susceptible to perhaps being something else than only humans. No one was – even indirectly – invited to imagine being ants. But we were humans alert in a poetic space created by the encounter of what we each offered, all placed in an immersive sphere and perspective-changing prism of snow.

Anthropological riffs

The following sequence may illustrate one of the ways we created material through our interdisciplinary collaboration: a kind of real-time collage.



*Ants walking on cooking range: Relating at home to our ant performers (or, their cousins, Lasius Niger).
Photo: C Fentz*

Performing artist Betina and I would prepare a sketch of what could happen on site when we were all gathered. We started off with some ant facts delivered by our ant expert Joachim. I would ask him to talk about a certain subject from the ant world such as how an ant comes into being; or the different lives of worker ants/males/queens; or swarming; or territorial wars. We agreed upon the start and end element of his one to three minutes of free talking so that there was a compositional frame for his enthusiasm. When Joachim had given his short talk, Betina and I would usually initiate a concrete action somehow related to his info, trying out physical or imaginative elements of the ant world. Then, anthropologist Andreas would embark on what he calls a ‘riff’ – an expression borrowed from jazz music.¹¹ He would elaborate on the subject, establishing various perspectives, weaving threads and comparisons to related issues. Andreas’ ongoing job – from his vantage point of both anthropology and brain research – was to give perspectives on the societal structures of humans with the help of those of ants.

One example of this work sequence ran as follows: Joachim told us about how ants communicate

11) A riff refers to a brief, relaxed phrase repeated over changing melodies.

via chemical substances. He explained that some of these function as an alarm sent out in the form of gas and are meant for fast messages; others are oil-based, showing ants the trail to food and are designed to linger for a long time (unless a human, intentionally or unintentionally, makes a break in the trail). Many home owners recognise this from our kitchen tables in spring, or from a splash of fallen ice cream on the terrace during summer. In other words, such an ant food trail stays in place for a whole day or even a period of days. Andreas then began 'the communication riff' by saying: "What if our spoken language was lying around in the park here, like cubes and other shapes, dropped behind us? Or if we would hear pieces of sentences hanging in the air...?" This riff later developed into a text about how humans communicate – from the time when Gutenberg systematized the Chinese invention of book printing, across the centuries of newspapers until the present day of the internet, when war can perhaps be declared via *Twitter*.



*An ant for each guest – in Danish called 'orange ants' because they taste like oranges.
Photo: Martin Dam Kristensen*

Once Andreas had taken us through the story of human communication, Joachim gave a summary about the anthills being superorganisms. At this point in the final performance, the guests stand in a circle facing outwards with closed eyes. While a soundscape is played, each guest (with eyes closed) is given a small vial with a live ant inside. I will not reveal what happens next as – who knows – you may experience the performance one day. (It is, however, thoroughly described in Rosendal Nielsen's upcoming article in *Kultur & Klasse*, forthcoming 2020).

Interdisciplinary sound and chemicals

The sound design process for our piece saw elements of interdisciplinary collaboration contained in one single person. Maiken's sound work, as noted earlier, was partly based on pre-recorded elements such as ants walking on her super-sensitive microphones, or ants working on dismantling an apricot. But these field recordings were supplemented in a very complex and rich way as her final work emerged from the interdisciplinarity qualities Maiken contains herself. Being both a chemist and a sound artist, she used the chemical substances and mixes of the hormone-based communication systems of the ants as registered by ant researchers. With the help of software from the biological sciences, she 'translated' the vibrations of these pheromones into a multi-faceted sound experience, which affects the body of the listener in several ways. Her soundscape is tactile, sensory and intriguing. Since we never explain the sources of the sound – until after the performance – the sounds: "... add a sense of a strange, invisible presence during the walk" (Nielsen 2020) [my translation].



Woman in front of group: Sound designer Maiken Vibe testing in May 2017.

Photo: Lotus Lykke Skov

The alarm pheromones translated into sound are somewhat unpleasant and come across much like an alarm in our human sound world. Very sinister, peculiar and 'Unheimlich'. The vibrations are absolutely readable, even for our species: *this.is.an.alarm!*

Maiken's interdisciplinary capacities mean that her work contains transmissions from one sphere into another, or rather, a mix of two disciplines into one expression. Without having access to our sound designer's head or inner dialogue, I wonder what differences might be found if we compared her process of collaborating between her own professional spheres with the process of two individuals collaborating from each their work-sphere. I suppose that she must have her own

translation logic, knowing the two ‘languages’ herself. What questions does she not need to ask, and what questions does she perhaps not think of? This is an interesting area of inquiry, since I imagine that what she must have had going on in her own working process must have been parallel to the ongoing clarification of terms and notions in our group.

How might we work with the enormous subject of The Anthropocene?

A question arose from our work processes: can we create a piece where a certain ethics is chosen for relating to guests (as we indeed did), but retain space for various and perhaps contrasting ethics or worldviews expressed within the piece? In hindsight, I would create some clearer ‘shelves’ for differences to be expressed. However, what we did create was a coherent piece, and, as explained below, my worldview is central to my pieces – if not present in the final piece, at least present during the work process. This, of course, effects the ethics towards our guests: treating them with respect and informing them in good faith – even if teasing them can be part of a chosen dramaturgy.

We have also started to gain some experience of trying to accommodate almost opposing worldviews inside our work team.¹²

Central for the work of Secret Hotel is that I dislike the labels of Nature and Culture. In Western societies, we talk about going ‘out into Nature’ to recharge for recreational purposes. But I always ask, tongue-in-cheek: Where do we then go, when we go back? Is that Nature, Culture or just ‘indoors’? The dichotomy of Nature-Culture is central to the cultures of industrialisation and capitalist production, which for several centuries, through a process of distancing and dissociation, have grown to perceive landscapes, places, and other species (=Nature) as resources for homo sapiens just meant for our taking. The price for acting according to this worldview is only growing by the year and its magnitude is now hard to ignore even for deniers of climate change. All other possible labels or concepts for the natural world have pros and cons, and different contexts may call for different labels. I affirm that all industrialized societies need to view more interactions with the planet and its life sphere through the lenses of other worldviews. This is an interesting subject on its own: What other worldviews exist as inspiration and could possibly have effects upon the actions and interactions of humans? One source of inspiration could be said to exist in most indigenous cultures: the notion of Animism. This maintains that the living world is alive: animated. Animals, trees, rivers, mountains, and places have a soul and all beings are connected. At present, there are tendencies within brain science to look positively at such otherwise flimsy notions as panpsychism,¹³ which claims that all living entities have some level of consciousness. In contemporary contexts, this more-than-human approach is labelled many things – one is the multispecies paradigm shift. The idea that we need to focus our attention on all the others around us is central to the series of performances that Secret Hotel has embarked on.

The mix of professions in our team obviously spurred us to investigate the different ideas about ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ that we each represented. As this is a bottomless subject we would have needed much more unencumbered time to delve further. What seemed to prevail for most of the

12) In the piece that Secret Hotel is preparing at present – *Banquet for Bees* – we have been aware of this issue from the beginning. Partly because of the experiences from the ant work, and partly because one of our Hungarian performers is a vegan, and therefore theoretically against working with bees.

13) Nikola Gøttsche about the work which Arthur Eddington and Bertrand Russell did in the 1920s: ”Bevidsthed var ikke en magisk kraft af ikke-fysisk karakter, men det var heller ikke noget, vi bare skulle lade være med at bekymre os om. Bevidsthed var derimod noget, der var vævet ind i alt stof – fra de mindste partikler og hele turen op; et fundamentalt træk ved al materie.” Zetland, 2019.

team was the dichotomy of Nature-Culture – deep-seated in the foundations of Western culture. Yet in recent years, it seems more and more concrete and scientific proof is emerging to support what indigenous peoples have always said: that all is interconnected.¹⁴ So, one way to deal with this blind spot of our Western cultures could be to shed some light on it: to become aware of the paradigm that we ourselves live within.

I asked anthropologist Andreas to give our guests a short information-block on Bruno Latour and his analysis of how Western cultures have cherished a notion that we have done something different than all other civilizations – dividing Nature from Culture. Latour tells us that in fact Western cultures have never managed to really carry out this division, but rather mix many categories which are difficult to place in culture or nature (Latour, 2006). What exists is the perception that we have managed a separation.

Concretely, our guests were walked in a row (with closed eyes) to a tree in the park (see 2nd photo from the top). They were alerted – eyes now open – to how the roots of this deciduous tree, invisible below our feet, are just as big as the canopy. The same goes for an anthill: there is just as much anthill below as above ground. This approach might appear to be cementing dichotomies, but we talked about this in order to direct the attention of our guests to the hidden elements around them, and to how the ground is a whole world for ants and other insects and critters, inaccessible to humans. From here, Andreas took us through some of the ways we humans navigate the world through categories, which we zoom in and out of, and up and down, in line with Latour's analysis. We hear a sound, we categorize it as a child, actually it is *my* child. Or we see a bird, and in the next second we may register what species of bird. This need to categorize exists in all human cultures, but modern humans claim to think in terms of 'nature' and 'culture'. Andreas ended his text by asking: What is a barking dog: nature or culture? Or a botanical garden?¹⁵

Andreas' riff ran in the direction of my interest, but differences remained. Overall, his role became to act as a kind of mediator or translator between ant facts and performing arts actions. Through his sharing of perspectives there was always a more interesting field to work concretely within than just 'translating' ant facts into actions. He helped the necessary abstractions happen. However, I experienced that this talk did not spark a strong enough urge in us to leave our mental Western dichotomy – even if we had been helped to become aware of it. Admittedly, though, this was a large wish to have brought to a project with too little working time.

In sharing the topic of worldviews with our guests in this accessible form, it became clear how the worldviews within our ant team were different (and probably remain so). Not so much because of coming from different backgrounds, but perhaps more because of my animistic worldview, which I experience is not the common approach in my home country, Denmark. This is a key factor driving my interest in ways to help us visualize, sense, and mentally struggle with radically different worldviews than our own. My wish is to find modes which might push us to try thinking outside our own well-known paradigms, modes which invite us to try experiencing the world through other prisms or lenses. I would say we managed to merge our disciplines, and that we upheld a productive coexistence regarding divergent worldviews – but the push toward a bigger paradigm shift is something I would want to explore in more depth on future occasions. For the

14) There is, by now, a plethora of literature on this admittedly rather broad subject. For instance, Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, or Jeremy Narby's *Intelligence in Nature: An Inquiry into Knowledge*, or Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, as well as scientific articles on how sage bushes communicate via airborne signals, trees via mycelium, etc.

15) This is a loose rendering of Andreas' precise text.

piece itself, I believe it was not a problem that we ‘backstage’ had different opinions. But in a different type of work process this fact would have probably rubbed off more visibly on the final piece.

Summoning the swarming ants

In his article on the performance, Thomas Rosendal Nielsen, our participatory researcher, asks what loop of observation Secret Hotel is staging: “how does the ant become visible for the human, and the human become visible for herself through the perspective of the ant?”¹⁶

Each guest who experiences our *Walking Lecture on Ants* must decide for themselves what they think of the piece. But I can conclude that I found it instructive and challenging in a nurturing way to make this interdisciplinary piece. Why? Because my terminology got challenged, as did my notion of ways to communicate, along with the scope of my methods for approaching material and disseminating it. In my wish to make our guests aware of the pervasive Western paradigm of dichotomies, I was also positively challenged concerning how to verbalize my own worldview.

Our wishes for the performance were ambitious: we not only wanted to render information, bodily experiences, and reflections about ants in an artistic framework; we also wanted to create perspectives on deep time, present views on the status of different animals not widely shared, and explore various worldviews or ways of perceiving ourselves and other species on the planet.

I suppose that to a certain extent our piece became a good version of what might be termed a collage – yet in a way where all elements are both part of the bigger piece and can somehow also function more or less on their own and retain their own value. Nielsen comments on this, noting that:

The piece does not become an organic unison/whole, where each unit is decided by and defining for the whole [...] Rather the elements are allowed to partake, to stay being the things that they are, being principally inexhaustible, and the walking performance establishes paths between the small, inexhaustible and incomplete worlds of these things.¹⁷

Since 2017, we have shown selections of the full performance in diverse settings and in different formats, and we experience that the interdisciplinarity remains, even when some of the original cast is not present. This occurs simply through keeping some of the info or actions which were previously shared by those contributors now not present.

Certainly, had we enjoyed the luxuries of having more time, we would have gained a deeper understanding and thus created different material. Yet I think the interdisciplinary collaboration succeeded partly because we had a strict framework in which to conduct our trial and error – the framework being to create a performance; a walking lecture. Part of the explanation for the successful result was mutual respect and having fun. Ant researcher Joachim reports that he found it “challenging, in a cool way”, and has learned about the importance of also activating people’s emotions. He also reports that he is curious to come back into “our world”, as he will perhaps be involved in a choreographic piece next year.¹⁸

16) Nielsen in *Kultur & Klasse*, forthcoming issue. My translation.

17) Nielsen, *Kultur & Klasse*, forthcoming issue. My translation.

18) From phone talk, August 2019, and live talk, November 2019.



Having fun, trying out an idea, which became what in Danish theatre-lingo is called “A Killed Darling”.

Photo: C Fentz

Though we were an ensemble of white Westerners, we did manage, with Haraway, to nurture the attachment sites and contact zones, learning from each other. I believe that we each functioned as new prisms for each other, helping each other to see our work spheres and approaches anew. And hopefully, we also offer new prisms or lenses to our guests – even if we can never fully access the perspective of the ant. Our researcher remarks: “The walking performance does not stage a jump between two distinct perspectives, but a slide, a movement, a game, actually a loop between a human and an ant-like way to see the world. Perspectives are, after all, not lenses that can be put on and taken off as needed”. (Nielsen, my translation)

Perhaps together – less focused on being individuals – we can more fully experience what it might be like to be part of a superorganism, no matter what worldviews we have. My hope is that this can help us gain new perspectives on current human practices and on the fuller interactions that might be possible with the other inhabitants on this planet – giant ones as well as tiny.

Joachim summarised in August: “Den største gevinst er, at jeg har lært at hvis man kan få følelserne i tale, så får man en dyb adgang til folk. Det var meget påfaldende og spændende for mig. Jeg har mødt helt nye målgrupper, som bl.a. er uden en primær myreinteresse. Jeg er vild med denne form for arbejde og at kunne udvide målgruppen. At fx skulle koge nogle informationer ned indenfor et tekstligt bånd; den simplificering kommer jeg længere med. Jeg er parat til at samarbejde med en koreograf nu, fordi vi har lavet, det vi har lavet sammen. Interfacet mellem fagområderne er helt vildt godt”.

Bibliography

- Gadamer, H.G.** (1997): *Truth and Method*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Galotti, Mattia and Frith, Chris D.** (2013): *Social Cognition in the We-mode*. CellPress, Opinion.
- Gøttsche, Nikola** (2019): En gruppe hjerneforskere mener at alting har en bevidsthed. Seriøst, alt, *Zetland*.
- Kolbert, Elisabeth** (2014): *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Henry Holt and Company.
- Latour, Bruno** (2006): *Vi har aldrig været moderne – et essay om symmetrisk antropologi*. Kbh.: Hans Reitzel.
- Mitman, Gregg** (2019): *Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing*. <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/?fbclid=IwAR1zDrMSV8k8WwNjy39k6lmg6vy0LjOuw3v11349SXIIFaygSjffSiBBqSRzs>
- Nielsen, Thomas Rosendal** (2020): *Mennesket i myreperspektiv. Secret Hotels Vandringsforelæsning om Myrer (2017) som antropocen poetik*. Kultur & Klasse, 2020.
- Roepstorff, Andreas** (2019): *At tale med træer; en øvelse i perspektivering*. <https://www.kontemplation.dk/at-tale-med-traeer/>
- Secret Hotel** (2018): *Vandringsforelæsning om Myrer, version 2.0, dansk, 25.05.2018*. Manuskript. Upubliceret.

Christine Fentz

has an MA in Dramaturgy, and trained as a performer and director in group theatre in Germany. She is Artistic Director at Secret Hotel, Aarhus and Earthwise Residency Centre, Mols, specializing in participatory work and more-than-human topics.

She is co-editor of *Artistic Research. Strategies for Embodiment*, with Tom McGuirk, Aarhus University Press: 2015. She also worked on the editorial board of cultural political publications “Rå Hvidbog” (2010) and “OVERVEJELSER” (2011) from *Independent Performing Artists* DK, and has authored various articles and essays.
