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Anthroposcenic Performance and the Need For 'Deep Dramaturgy'

LARA STEVENS

The United Nations has declared that 'Climate Change is the defining issue of our time' (United Nations 2016). Unprecedented changes in the environment are leading to extreme weather events, reduced crop yields, ocean acidification and drastic and accelerated species extinction. The impact of these changes is profoundly affecting human health through reduced access to safe shelter, food, care and sustainable jobs, rendering the climate emergency the key political concern of our time. In 2018 the World Bank reported that countries needed to prepare for more than 100 million internally displaced people due to the effects of climate change (Rigaud et al. 2018), and this figure is rising. The possibility of near-term human extinction is increasingly raised in relation to climate change (see, for example, Bendell 2018; Cohen et al. 2016; Colebrook 2014a, 2014b; McPherson 2019; Read and Alexander 2019). Increasingly, the importance of imagination and narrative is being flagged as vital to human survival for its capacity to reconceptualize ways of living and engaging with the planet (see, for example, Alexander 2014; Eckersall 2019; Plumwood 2007; Rose 2009). Theatre can play an important role because it not only represents problems associated with ecological change for audiences to consider but also has the capacity to put forward radically new ways of living, being, seeing, acting and interacting that move beyond those that have led us into this predicament in the first place.

Jem Bendell has recently argued that we cannot continue to prioritize plans for mitigation of environmental changes in the face of 'inevitable near-term social collapse' (2018). He prefers we adopt strategies of 'deep adaptation', which will involve more than 'resilience'. Instead, he contends, we need to embrace 'relinquishment' – the letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs. This might mean withdrawal of dwelling on coastlines, shutting down vulnerable industrial facilities and giving up present modes of consumption. Deep adaptation also requires 'restoration' – people and communities rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life and organization that our hydrocarbon-fuelled civilization has eroded. In light of these urgent changes, I examine the role that art might play in the crisis.

This prompts me to ask: might we need a 'deep dramaturgy' – a dramaturgy that emphasizes 'relinquishment' of certain attitudes and theatrical practices and 'restoration' of others? What do we need to relinquish from current ways of doing theatre and what do we need to restore so that performance can play a productive role in responding to the climate emergency? What does it mean to make theatre in the age of the Anthropocene and in the face of potential social collapse or even human extinction? How do we set the scene to make Anthroposcenic theatre, which is to say, theatre and performance that intervenes in the ecological emergency and shows possible alternative modes of living and engaging with the natural world? What can theatre or performance do to bring us closer to a more ethical relationship to our immediate environments? Above all, what can theatre and performance do to expand our ecological consciousness that a walk through the forest cannot?

Twenty-five years ago, Una Chaudhuri put forward a model for Ecological Theatre. Chaudhuri's essay '"There must be a lot of fish in that lake": Toward an ecological theater' considered the prospects for a theatre that would bring to an end the practice of treating the environment as the scenic background to the human-centred drama (1994: 24). She critiqued the ways in which theatre scholarship had for too long overlooked the agency of nature in dramatic works and 'read' the natural world as simply symbol or metaphor for human concerns.

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A new kind of theatre, an Ecological Theatre, she argued, would abandon modern naturalism and realism, considered to be humanism's privileged dramatic form. In place of this Anthropocentric theatre, Chaudhuri initially favoured site-specific performance for its capacity to stimulate spectators' awareness of their spatial and temporal situation and the co-existence of non-human others in the space. Her scholarship has sought to consider animal performance on its own terms, moving beyond human aesthetic values and towards non-human-led performance.

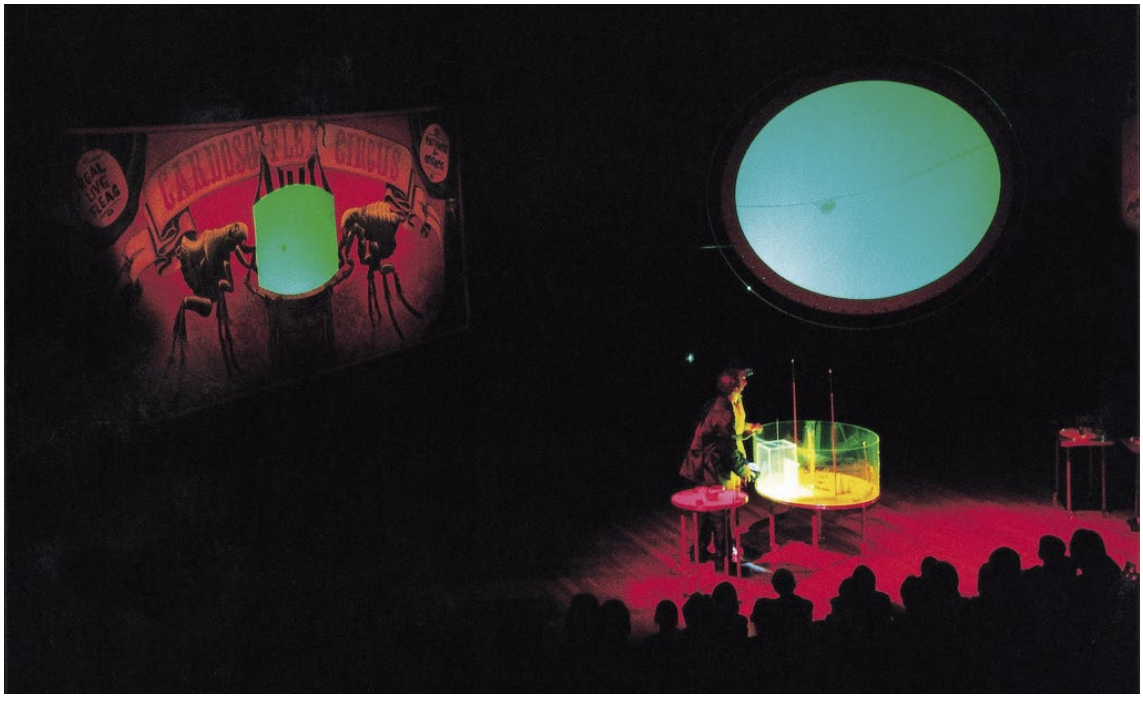
More recently, Chaudhuri has considered human-centred drama that responds to climate change, noting some key examples of what she calls 'Anthropo-Scenes' or theatre with an 'Anthroposcenic-imagination' in the plays of Caryl Churchill and Wallace Shawn (2015). The Anthropocene is a term proposed by the atmospheric scientist Paul J. Cruzen to denote a new geological epoch that follows the Holocene. This recommended geological period has one marked difference from those that preceded it – it has been shaped by a single earthly species, the human. Since the Anthropocene demands that we as humans now recognize ourselves as a geophysical force with catastrophic effects, Chaudhuri argues that drama with an Anthroposcenic consciousness must do the same. Key to such 'Anthropo-Scenes' and the representation of anthropogenic climate change on stage, as Chaudhuri sees it, is a 'derangement of scale', a marked incommensurability between everyday human actions/behaviours and their contribution to climate change (19). She acknowledges how difficult it is to make art that represents and relocates the human in relation to geologic time scales and geophysical forces. Yet she advocates for moving away from the traditional theatrical subject matter of human biography, psychology and sociology and the politics of special interest groups (20). My use of the term Anthroposcenic performance borrows from and expands upon Chaudhuri's thinking, turning the focus back to her earlier interest in non-human performance. Non-human performance encourages human spectators to think beyond their own species and challenges the myth of human exceptionalism, which has led us to our present climate emergency.

In 'Introduction: Animal acts for changing times, 2.0: A field guide to interspecies performance' (2014), Chaudhuri noted that it remains a challenge for artists and scholars to talk about actual animals as self-determining creatures, as something more or other than symbols for human ideas and metaphors for human dramas. She writes:

> Animals show us how much we still need to know, not only about them but also about ourselves. At the same time, they show us how very hard it is going to be to attain that knowledge, especially if we cling to our old habits of inquiry, our old reliance on 'ocular proof' and disembodied ideas. Much of the new knowledge gained through animal acts comes from going way past the limits of logic and book learning, and accepting instruction, instead, from the life of bodies. This is, of course, why performance offers more to animal knowledge than any other cultural form: its reliance on physicality, materiality, and embodiment makes it especially useful for venturing into areas where language is absent. (Chaudhuri 2014: 10)

Chaudhuri's argument that we need to stop clinging to old habits and gain new knowledge from the physicality, materiality and embodiment of non-human bodies aligns with Bendell's demands for 'relinquishment' and 'restoration' in current modes of living.

Western theatre has historically seen itself as a radical artform; even the bourgeois realist theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was created in reaction to the melodramatic styles that preceded it which were perceived as too disconnected from lived experience and from the pertinent political questions of the time. For those in the discipline of theatre and performance studies today – in a moment of ecological breakdown – we need to challenge every facet of our lives, not just the kinds of food we eat, what modes of transport we take, where we invest or divest but also how we make performance and even what constitutes 'theatre' and 'performance'. There is important work emerging that is beginning to challenge traditional ideas of which bodies are acting, animate, agential on stage as well as off. Rebecca Schneider's 'New materialism and performance studies' (2015), for example, provides an important starting point for redefining 'live art' by broadening the scope to include non-human matter (previously perceived as inanimate) 'acting' across time scales that move well beyond human lifespans.



Cardoso Flea Circus at the Sydney Opera House, 2000. *Photo Anne Maregianno*

In attempting to think through Anthroposcenic performance or 'deep dramaturgy' I will consider a series of performances devised by Colombian-born, Sydney-based artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso, the *Cardoso Flea Circus* 1994 (–2000) and 'The Art of Seduction' (2016/18).

CARDOSO FLEA CIRCUS

Cardoso Flea Circus was first performed in 1994 and toured until 2000. In this work, Cardoso trained thousands of cat fleas to perform traditional circus acts in the mode of the travelling flea circuses of the nineteenth century. She began with a troupe of fifty fleas and the largest performance included approximately 1,500 fleas. The traditional fleas used in flea circuses were human fleas, *pulex irritans*, but Cardoso was unable to use them because she could not find any as they are yet another species driven to near extinction by humans. At each performance audiences entered a tent structure to find an oval glass enclosure that held a miniature big-top tent that measured about 1.3 × 0.9 metres. Circus music played throughout the performance. The walls behind the enclosure were covered with screens. A roving cameraman used a high-powered camera to magnify the acts taking place within the enclosure in real time for the rows of human spectators clamouring to see the tiny stars. Dressed alternately as a professorial figure or dominatrix ringmaster, Cardoso stage-managed the fleas' performances and commentated the acts and the feats of her performers for her audiences.

To successfully train the fleas, Cardoso sought out experts in flea training but the artform was dead. Abandoning 'old habits of inquiry', Cardoso reverted to trial and error. It took Cardoso five years of intensive research and experimentation, discussions with veterinarians and observing the instinctive behaviours and desires of fleas to successfully 'teach' the fleas their circus tricks. During the performance, particular fleas walked the highwire, danced to the rhythms of the Tango, were fired from a canon on a trampoline, pulled a toy train 160,000 times their weight, jumped hoops, swung on a miniature trapeze and danced in micro-tutus. Many of the fleas received nicknames that related to their skills – Harry Fleadini 'escaped' from the arena via a thread; Teeny and Tiny walked the tightrope; Samson and Delilah lifted weights made of cotton balls. All the performances were mere appearances of learned behaviours and were, in fact, based on the fleas' instinctive drives. Throughout the training process Cardoso concluded that 'nature works for itself' (Stevens 2019) by which she means that nature works to protect its survival rather than for the

pleasures of humans. The work gave the illusion of flea agency but was artfully choreographed around their instinctive drives to escape or self-protect.

Cardoso Flea Circus captured the imagination of thousands of human spectators all over the world who scrambled to purchase tickets. In some sites it became so popular the performances had to be balloted. The performance was exhibited at many of the major international sites and festivals, including in a tipi erected outside the Centre Pompidou, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Arts Festival Atlanta, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, the San Francisco Exploratorium and the Sydney Opera House. One of the *Cardoso Flea Circus* tents, enclosures, miniature props and original musical score were eventually purchased by the Tate London and the performance toured as a video installation.

The *Cardoso Flea Circus* is a performance piece of animal exploitation and cruelty in the mode of traditional circuses throughout history. Meiling Cheng (2007) would classify it as an 'animalwork', that is to say, ephemeral artworks that incorporate animals as in/voluntary performers and/or manipulated art objects. One reviewer from the Arts Festival of Atlanta wrote: 'By giving them [the fleas] names, telling stories of their prowess, and mourning certain untimely deaths, the artist succeeds in transforming carriers of disease and death into noble creatures' (Byrd 1998:45). Another was more critical of the cruelty involved in Cardoso's training, writing:

> As animal circuses decline in popularity on grounds of cruelty, it may seem odd that no-one bats an eyelid at Colombian Maria Fernanda Cardoso training her charges by tying them in wire harnesses and putting them in small glass tubes so that they concuss themselves whenever they try to do anything other than walk on all sixes. But then, Cardoso's charges are fleas. (Shuttleworth 2000)

Here the reviewer points out the hierarchies of value within speciesism that confer greater worth on more 'charismatic animals', such as the polar bear and the panda, as well as trading on the human discomfort with insects, particularly arthropods, which are often viewed as pests or vermin.

For Cardoso, the power relation between herself and the fleas was more complex, and she spent much time contemplating how the fleas were perceiving her. She said that, from the perspective of the fleas: 'I felt that I was God … I also felt I was their mother' (Stevens 2019). She would conduct a memorial each time a flea died in her care. She was also 'host' to their parasitic needs, which is to say, she offered herself up to them as their food source, feeding them from her arm three times per day. Her feeling of being like a God came less from a sense of mastery or power over the insects and more from imagining how she would appear to them given the difference in scale. She remarked that she would have seemed enormous to the fleas and would have been a presence that they could feel through vibrations but not see holistically, operating as she described, at the 'edge of perception for them' (Stevens 2019).

Cardoso Flea Circus does not sit easily with Chaudhuri's idea of interspecies performance, not least because of the power imbalance between the interspecies performers and the way in which these insects were anthropomorphized and trained to mimic human forms of entertainment. Although Cardoso fed the fleas daily from her blood, she ironically noted that she lived off them too, as the work became a major financial success (Shuttleworth 2000). The work was also heavily reliant on 'ocular proof', which enabled Cardoso to turn the fleas' behaviour into a 'freak show' for human consumption. It restored largely forgotten or outmoded performance training techniques that are not necessarily productive in the midst of a climate emergency. This was a work that was seemingly not made with an ecological consciousness, not least for the ways in which it reinforced long-standing attitudes that the natural world is for human consumption and exploitation. Its disinterest in relinquishing ideas of human mastery and control over the natural world sets it in opposition to the kinds of deep dramaturgical modes of thinking and making performance that we require today and reflected the dominant attitudes of the historical moment in which it was created in the mid-1990s.

On the other hand, the performance made new discoveries about fleas and their behaviours, pushed the limits of logic and book learning and, in many ways, was driven by the needs, instincts and drives of the tiny non-human bodies. Its popularity among international publics suggests that it provoked either a rare sense of human

wonder or curiosity about an insect species or fed a public appetite for the abnormal or repellent in the mode of 'freak shows' exhibited as part of circus performances since at least the sixteenth century through to the twentieth. Either way, it certainly provided humans a perspective on the behaviours and visual image of the flea that radically differed from the more common encounter in the fur of their dog or cat. As such, the work had the potential to encourage humans to reconsider their relationship to the animal – its intelligence and impressive bodily capacities, or to reinforce the righteousness of human dominance and myths concerning insects lacking sentience and thus experiences of fear or pain.

Cardoso's work with creatures that are unvalued or even despised by the human animal in *Cardoso Flea Circus* began her on a path throughout her career that has taken a profound interest and reverence in tiny insects, their behaviours and anatomy (see, for example, Stevens 2015). *Cardoso Flea Circus* was the first of a number of works centred on the performance of the non-human. In these works, Cardoso does not appear as a performer as she did in *Cardoso Flea Circus*. Instead, she allows the non-human to perform itself, particularly in performances of courtship, copulation and reproduction. I argue that these more recent performances open up new avenues for seeing and perceiving human and non-human species using techniques that we might usefully describe as deep dramaturgy. Further, they incite a dialogue between the problematic human–non-human binary and are more radically shaking up human understandings of performance, aesthetics and the potential obsolescence of the human in the drama of our biosphere.

She + He = Art II, 2018. *Digital imaging in collaboration with Geoff Thompson and Andy Wang.*

'ON THE ORIGINS OF ART I' AND 'ON THE ORIGINS OF ART II' (2016/18/19)

In 2018 I attended 'The Art of Seduction' exhibition by Cardoso at ARC ONE Gallery in Melbourne, Australia. Two of the works included in the series were 'On the Origins of Art I' and 'On the Origins of Art II'. In these performances, Cardoso once again returned to the aesthetic of magnifying tiny under-represented insects. This time it was the Australian *Maratus*, an eight-eyed jumping spider commonly known as the peacock spider. These spiders are the size of a speck to the naked human eye and Cardoso makes the scale of her amplifications apparent in photographs titled *Actual Size* that appear in the exhibition. The males have bright colourful tails with iridescent highlights like the peacock bird while the females are a dull brown-grey and hairy. The males use these tails to perform a kind of dance to attract a mate, like the male peacock bird or the male Bird of Paradise.

'On the Origins of Art I' and 'II' are video installations created with high-definition (HD) macro cinematography and a laser vibrometer that capture the visual and audio performance of

this extraordinary mating ritual. In the videos, the male *Maratus* waves its legs like an air-traffic controller on a runway, in order to attract the female's attention. From a human perspective the dance has a comic element. Given the context, he seems to be saying, 'Over here, over here, look at me!' The vibrations of the dance and the rhythm build to the point where the *Maratus* unfolds and fans out his iridescent abdominal flap and shakes it from side to side as he side-steps back and forth. Cardoso uses a vibrometer to capture and amplify the sound of a rhythmic beat that the insects make by vibrating their abdomens. This beat sets the pace for the dance. If the female is impressed by the male's artistry, his beats, his colours, what might most accurately be described as his 'twerking', she will allow him to approach her.

In the description of the work Cardoso writes:

> He is about 4 mm big, she is 6mm. He is colourful and outlandish, she is not. He tries really hard to get her, she watches him. Hard to please females have driven the *Maratus* males to such extremes that they are the [*sic.*] probably the first ever performance artists: they dance and choreograph, drum and sing, all at the same time as they wave their colourful tails. (Cardoso cited in Museum of Contemporary Art Australia 2018)

Instead of manipulating the *Maratus* to behave in ways humans might consider interesting or aesthetically impressive, in this work Cardoso plays the role of scientific observer and invites audiences to do the same. She offers a different experience to seeing the *Maratus* in nature or in a nature documentary where the spiders would be in their natural habitats. Cardoso places them against a stark white backdrop, a seemingly traditional gallery space, creating a 'stage' for the *Maratus* dance and beats. In so doing, she makes the actions more readable to humans as performance and their demands for ocular proof.

We might say that the performances were curated or stage-managed rather than created by Cardoso. She facilitates human spectatorship to an impressive non-human choreography, music and visual display previously invisible and inaudible to humans. She resists the temptation to overlay the *Maratus'* dance and beats with music. She emphasizes the animal's 'complex system of courtship display that exhibits its prowess as a dancer, musician and visual artist' (Cardoso 2019a). We might say that, in 'The Art of Seduction', Cardoso respects the *Maratus* on their own terms. In foregrounding the female *Maratus*, she allows it to stand as a performance that is not *for* humans. Instead we are privileged spectators to another species' performance, one in which we might recognize some shared aesthetic values. This, however, is not to suggest that Cardoso does not interfere with the animals or stage-manage the performance. She fully acknowledges that the mating ritual is entirely orchestrated for the camera as much as a nature documentary contains much behaviour that is not 'natural'. Such curation requires great technical precision and scientific expertise, sensitivity and ethical considerations. It is this that sets apart her mode of stage-managing the fleas from the performance-making of the *Maratus*.

For this project, Cardoso collaborated with spider experts in order to locate the *Maratus*. She applied for permits from national parks that allowed her to take away limited numbers of the insect from any one location. Locating the *Maratus* is painstaking work due to its size, even for spider experts. Over the years, however, Cardoso gradually learned how to recognize their movements and spider silks in the undergrowth of the bush. In order for the male to be enticed into performing the 'dance', the female *Maratus* has to be a virgin and therefore must be collected early in the season. Once the insects were in captivity, Cardoso had to develop techniques to capture their behaviour on film. In order to get the most ideal angles she created a tiny stage out of paper and would brush the insects gently onto it using a paintbrush. It took her a number of years to figure out how to work with the pheromones that would prompt the desirable behaviours for filming. Evidently, there was much curatorial activity behind the scenes of these 'artistic' performances.

We cannot know what the experience is for the intended audience, the female *Maratus*, yet there is much anticipation in waiting for the female's response to the male artistry. It leaves a strong impression that her decision to mate or not to mate is based on a complex combination of audio–visual–kinaesthetic aesthetics. Jane Goodall notes in her review of the show that the *Maratus* are 'equipped with exquisite decorative

features and sensory organs so refined that a purely functional interpretation of them seems inadequate' (2013: 53). In trying to prove a clear difference between humans and animals, Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes argued that animals lacked a 'soul' (1993 [1637]). He famously likened animals to machines and hypothesized that the non-human animal's capacity for language was merely imitative rather than rational, writing that it is nothing more than 'nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs' (ibid.). But peacock spiders (and other non-human animals, such as the peacock bird and Bird of Paradise most obviously) complicate this picture. They show that animals, insects no less, barely large enough to be seen by the naked human eye, also value beauty, that they too have an aesthetic eye and ear, that they are the sum of more than just their organs, their programmed machinic drives.

Yet, it is not only the *Maratus*' visual flair – their reliance on attention-seeking gesture, spectacular colour, symmetrical pattern that resonates with our species, but also their use of sound as a tool for communication; their subsonic call, the vibrations created, make for a multi-modal form of communication. Cardoso insists through her title that this is 'The origins of art', that human culture has learned from nature, an inversion of an entire history of philosophy and science. The arresting beauty and the impressive displays of these creatures make a radical reversal of how we humans place ourselves as cultured beings at the pinnacle of the animal and non-human hierarchy. It is precisely the way in which this work demands a relinquishment of dominant human behaviours and beliefs over our own exceptionalism that makes it a potential model of deep dramaturgy. The present suffering of the natural world has been arrived at through centuries of Western instrumentalization of the natural world as limitless resource and an inflated sense of human intelligence where 'culture' has been positioned in stark opposition to nature.

For the human spectators, the nature/culture dichotomy set up by millennia of philosophy and science becomes suddenly blurred as we see aspects of ourselves in the performances of these tiny arachnids. The blurring of these once rigidly separated categories into what Donna Haraway (2003) calls 'naturecultures' is a reminder that there is no outside of nature for any species. This prompts us human spectators to move beyond thinking about the politics of socially and culturally conditioned performances, such as Judith Butler's slogan 'Gender, you're 'doing' it!' to more urgent ontological and epistemological relocations of ourselves within the Anthropocene – it reminds us: 'Nature, we *are* it!'

Responding to 'The Art of Seduction' Cardoso writes: 'I love working at the edge of perception. What fascinates me about the small is that it's even more complex than the big' (Cardoso 2019b). Such sentiments are shared with animal and performance studies scholar Steve Baker who writes that we come to animals 'as a reminder of the limits of human understanding, and also of the value of working *at those limits*' (Baker cited in Chaudhuri 2014: 11). Cardoso certainly works at the limits of human understanding by choosing to work with insects with which most people are very unfamiliar. She revels in the 'derangement of scale' and the incommensurability between human understandings of the non-human and the power of the very tiny to surprise and delight. It is precisely this play with scale and the shock of revelatory behaviours that thrust humans out of old habits of thinking that I argue make the works Anthroposcenic performance in Chaudhuri's sense. While Chaudhuri hopes for theatre and performance that can evoke geological scale, deep time scales, this begins with smaller shifts in perception of scale similar to the plays of Churchill and Wallace.

Models of the 'slow' movement – slow theatre, slow art, slow dramaturgy – are often extolled as more ecologically minded forms of cultural production and consumption. But how can we make slow theatre, slow art when there's no time left, when we might have already reached our 'tipping point'? When governments and corporations are doing too little too late to slow the rising air and sea temperatures? When the melted icecaps cannot be refrozen? Can we/Must we afford prolonged contemplation of an artwork, a slow burn? Perhaps in the 1960s and 1970s when the land art/environmental performance/a site specific movement began, there was still enough time left for such leisurely deliberation, but can we still have that same vantage point today in 2020?

Or do we need something that is more urgent and that demands letting go of the habits and lifestyles to which we cling, perhaps even to our privileging of our own species above all else?

Peter Eckersall and Eddie Paterson (2011) define 'slow dramaturgy' as dramaturgies that foreground time and reorient sensory perceptions. The rise of 'slow dramaturgy' indicates a shift in the pace, structure, material dimensions of theatre to bring out its dialectical, ecological and uncanny experiences (190). They write: 'The role of slow dramaturgy is to bring the everyday into this new awareness and to make this a problem for our consideration' (ibid.). 'The Art of Seduction' reveals the uncanny in the everyday natural world yet it only appears to human spectators as uncanny because of how profoundly we accept the idea that this thing we call culture is an exclusively human trait. The 'problem' then that the work invites its human audiences to consider is how ignorant or dissociated we may be from the behaviours, emotions, interactions of the non-human world that often flourish exquisitely around us without our notice.

Yet more than 'slow dramaturgy', I see these performances as employing a 'deep dramaturgy', which is to say, a dramaturgy that demands we surrender human exclusivity over artistic production. The 'depth' of the dramaturgy suggests a relationship to time and immersion into something that produces a capitulation – or shows how we human spectators might become, as Eckersall writes: 'parenthetical to, overwhelmed by, and even absent in contemporary existence' (2019: 308). 'On the Origins of Art I' and 'II' ask us to relinquish the human delusion of our monopoly over beauty, reason and aesthetic appreciation as well, more radically still, as the idea that everything beautiful in this world is for our consumption alone.

Like *Cardoso Flea Circus*, it asks us to shift perspective on the insect kingdom but this time with a greater respect for the subject matter as its own master (without presuming that the capturing of this footage is not without questionable ethics). What this kind of art tries to bring to audiences that a walk in the forest cannot, is a renewed, surprising or even voyeuristic encounter with the natural world that breaks our habitual modes of viewing our own and other species. This kind of performance and its dramaturgy has the potential to expand our ecological consciousness because it represents worlds and complex systems, inter-relations and modes of communication that operate at cross-purposes to the human hydrocarbon-fuelled, growth-driven narratives of 'progress'. These jarring moments of radical intimacy might make the relinquishment of our current lifestyles less painful as we accept and even embrace our human vulnerability and similarity to the non-human and work towards a non-human-centric restoration of the environment that our species has so profoundly altered and damaged.

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