



All photos by Karen Asher.

November 2 – December 7, 2018

Sympoietic Sound

HELGA JAKOBSON



Assembling Kin, Becoming Compost: Helga Jakobson's *Sympoietic Sound*

A response by

Dunja Kovačević

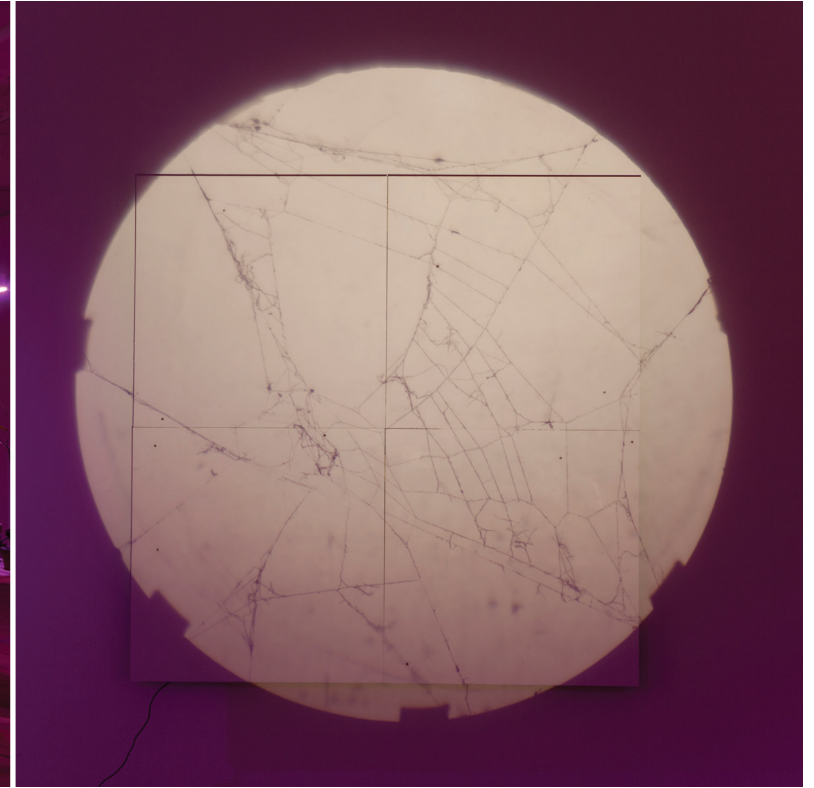
My visit to *Sympoietic Sound* began with an act of collective care: Helga Jakobson and I tended to the dead and changing things, sweeping up their remains. The plants chattered in the pink light, given voice through sensors Jakobson created and in the code she programmed, casting their murmurs throughout the gallery. We spoke, too, of the last year spent trying to systemize differently, to build respectful languages, and about the imperative to *world-with*.¹ Donna Haraway, one of our shared theoretical godmothers, urges, “who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth bound”² This is a question we returned to throughout the evening: what might it mean to become, to compose in collaboration *with* other earth-bound species?

The EconoUS2018 conference I attended in September, whose theme People, Plant, Economy, similarly asked: how do we build an economy that works for all?³ This is a question with great implications as we navigate unsustainable inequalities and a looming climate catastrophe. During the opening plenary discussion, Carol Ann Hilton, of the Hesquiaht Nation and founder of the Indigenomics Institute, reminded us that a single worldview built the conference room we were seated in and the same one shapes the economy we live within.⁴ But, there are so many, many, ways of viewing the world. Various modes, Sara Ahmed suggests, of orienting ourselves towards the world, and the beings and objects populating it.

In *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed writes, “what puts objects near depends on histories, on how things arrive, and on how they gather in their very availability as things to do things with.”⁵ To be oriented, really, is to be tending towards certain objects and, by natural consequence, not others. Orientation is then about what we face and from what direction the future beckons. But at what cost are we oriented towards some beings and not others? And, what might it look like to *reorient*—to bring other objects and beings near, to be open to new connections and ways of doing things with things?

Sabrina Scott, in *witchbody*, proposes magic as an alternative framework to notice and work collaboratively with other bodies. “Existence,” she writes, “is mutualistic material negotiation wherein bodies reach out to one another—tangled, merging, dissolving, touching, engaging, ignoring, changing shape. Magic draws attention to process. It makes visible connections we haven’t seen.”⁶ For Scott, a flagging houseplant, a pile of refuse, an animal carcass—all belong to larger systems of interconnectedness and interdependence that resist easy hierarchization. It is an adjustment of scale: thinking about the “environment” need not be defined by big, “out there” nature. The environment is also the everyday one we inhabit and the things we inhabit





them with. In a similar tradition, Jakobson, too, pulls from the everyday. Her plant menagerie is mostly salvaged, inherited and gifted. The technology she re-tools is cheap, open source, accessible. Hers is a process informed by curiosity, a process of noticing, subtle turning-toward the beings and objects that people her life.

Perhaps it is also a way of “making-persons, not necessarily as individuals or humans.”⁷ Haraway positions kinship creation between humans and other-than-human bodies as essential to preventing our assured mutual destruction due to large-scale environmental disaster.⁸ Acknowledging our

mutual inheritance and knotted destiny is necessary to acting in good faith. From this place we can treat one another as part of a global, flexible lineage. We can recognize one another as kin. To not do so, Scott writes, is to “deny others ‘being’ because they do not be as we be,” and this has consequences.⁹

Jakobson speaks about her plant-kin as individuals. Touring the exhibit, she explains: *these ones thrive in company, that one is a little quiet today*. Jakobson is something of an intuitive witch herself, performing embodied magic through entanglement. DIY sensors read the bioelectric currents coursing through their leaves, relaying their excitement (or maybe, boredom)



to a human public in now-detectable registers. Meanwhile, now defunct technologies—in the form of overhead projectors—are recast as contemporary phantasmagoria machines, playing spider webs projected on large screens. Another adjustment of scale.

In this space, we are immersed in a sound envelope of non-human life. By approximating our senses, because we are unfortunately limited in our understanding of other bodies as *beings*, we are reminded that our bodies, their presence and action, affect other bodies. This minimally invasive approach, or so Jakobson hopes, is predicated on the desire to be, or become, a *respectful visitor*. Through noticing, she is able to scaffold and facilitate a space for us to witness one another in a way approaching equilibrium. *Sympoietic Sound* is then an opening: a glimpse into what a world of more graceful and gracious interdependence between humans and other-than-humans might look, and sound, like.

Despite a historical devaluation of kitchen witchery and intuitive knowledges, a cultural turn is occurring. Jakobson suggested that people might turn to the occult as a means of coping when readily available authorities fail them. As we grapple with an atmosphere of political and environmental depression, what can a reorientation or directional shift do? And what possibilities does this entangled, techno-alchemy offer as a path forward? Technology is, after all, a type of mysticism. An interface is a shared boundary. Its functioning is only made possible through interconnection and resource sharing. For Jakobson, coding *is* spellcasting. The world we occupy is always already a contact zone, where our bodies are in constant interaction with other bodies, even (and especially) those we might not immediately recognize as bodies.¹⁰ Learning how to orient towards bodies and objects differently, to remain open to different connections, keeps the possibility of the future open, too. Maybe it engenders the possibility of a future at all.

Am I suggesting that simply noticing has transformative potential? Perhaps it is too late for us, for this planet as some social scientists believe.¹¹ All the more reason then to marvel at our however limited opportunity to interact with so many organisms, so many worldviews. Perhaps, if we were more attuned to this place, to the work of *worlding-with* our earthly kin, we would not be in our current predicament. If we spent a year, like Jakobson, learning to “catch” a spider web, to stretch the fine, but tensile, threads without breaking, we might also learn something about adaptability. We might still learn to listen.

Notes

- 1 This term is respectfully and lovingly paraphrased from Donna Haraway, who urges humans to systemize differently with the other organisms occupying this planet across, and with, difference in her work addressing what is (somewhat loosely) called the Anthropocene.
- 2 Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, p. 161.
- 3 EconoUS is an annual conference organized by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network, where I work, on a rotating basis across the country in cooperation and collaboration with different local partners.
- 4 The entire opening plenary session, “The Big IDEA for Real Change,” is available online via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJJizpp7hQo&list=PLMeCVIS0mcLVDW3SBN8MaUfGmSARzfHPV&index=2&t=0s>
- 5 Sara Ahmed, “Orientations, Towards a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Volume 12, Number 4, 2006, pp. 558.
- 6 Sabrina Scott, *witchbody*. Weiser Press, forthcoming March 2019.
- 7 Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, p. 161.
- 8 Of course, knowledge pertaining to the interconnectedness of humans and not-humans is not new, at least not to Indigenous peoples all over the world. It is important to acknowledge this theoretical kin-making owes a debt to those cultures that have been engaged in this collaborative worlding work for centuries already.
- 9 Sabrina Scott, *witchbody*. Weiser Press, forthcoming March 2019.
- 10 Scott references Haraway to discuss how magic, too, is another contact zone facilitated by bodies connecting with one another. See above.
- 11 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-academic-its-too-late-to-stop-climate-change-were-doomed/>



Installation view.

Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

aceartinc. gratefully acknowledges the generous support of associate members and donors, our volunteers, the Manitoba Arts Council, The Canada Council for the Arts, Media Arts and Visual Arts Sections, The City of Winnipeg Arts Council, WH and SE Loewen Foundation, and the Winnipeg Foundation.

aceartinc. is an Artist Run Centre dedicated to the support, exhibition, and dissemination of contemporary art. We do this via an open call for submissions and special projects through which we work with contemporary artists, curators, and art writers, including emerging artists and those from queer, Indigenous, and underrepresented communities. Contemporary art is at its most powerful when engaged with and thought about, and so we actively welcome the public, with all of its nuanced communities.

Dunja Kovačević is a Winnipeg-based emerging writer and critic born in former Yugoslavia. A femme lesbian, child refugee, and uninvited guest on this land, her work circles questions of (be) longing, (dis)orientations, and absent archives. She holds a MA in Cultural Studies from the University of Winnipeg and works in community development. Her work has appeared in *jeunesse: young people, texts, cultures*; *Border Crossings* and *Martha Street Journal*.

aceartinc.

2nd floor, 290 McDermot Ave.
Winnipeg MB R3B 0T2

204.944.9763

gallery@aceart.org

www.aceart.org

Tuesday-Saturday 12 - 5pm

