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/ CRIPPING PERFORMING ARTS

From Plant-Diagnosis to Plant(other)ness: Around the Performance I'm Not a Plant

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In this text I take Aleksandra Skotarek's performance *I'm Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness* (*Nie jestem rośliną. Strumień świadomości*) as my starting point for considering how reflection on the relationship with the vegetal can contribute to understanding disability. Can we think of these kinds of relations – which, following Haraway, I refer to as relations with significant otherness – as cripping the received semantic field and ideas by activating a perspective combining critical plant studies and Haraway's or Braidotti's feminist materialism? This perspective corresponds with the notion of plant(other)ness invoked in the text. At the same time, Skotarek's performance makes us consider the barriers that reflection on posthuman relationality runs into in confrontation with identity politics that seek the recognition of subjectivity, and how a specific experience of disability reconfigures the field of performance that explores relations with the non-human.

Keywords: plant-diagnosis, plant(other)ness, disability, relational feminism, performance

Shown in early February 2023 at the Centre for Inclusive Arts, Warsaw, Miya Masaoka's installation *When I Was a Plant* featured a large broad-

leaved monstera hooked up to an EEG machine. A suite of sensors recorded the plant's movements and inner impulses in response to contact such as touch. Each touch/movement was transposed into sound. Cards with brief notes lay scattered around the plant. Were the notes intended as records of words 'spoken' by the plant? The sounds generated by the machine were indistinct, contingent on the movements of the plant's stems and leaves, prone to interference, fickle. Unlike the physical contact, however, the words did not seem important. Touch and movement, including the plant's hidden inner flows and impulses, represented the primary form of communication. Only then came the next layer, an attempted translation of contact into sound, which could potentially take verbal form. Thus, Masaoka played not only with our ideas about plants and our relationship with them but also with how we approach communication. Is verbal language always a prerequisite for communication, even if it is purely fictional, imposed? What is language as opposed to what we call noise? Does imagined language inevitably lead to the anthropomorphization of the non-human, to the imposition on plants of terms and notions from outside the realm of vegetation? Or, rather, does the plant's purely speculative speech direct our attention to potential communication forms whose starting point would be a relationship with the non-human, to the possibility of imagining other shapes and new forms of subjects, bodies, matter?

In her performative talk accompanying the installation, Masaoka referenced her other works fuelled by her fascination with plants and with the body and voice. Her artistic explorations and experiments are a form of research into the relations between matter, movement and voice (such as her research into sounds produced inside the body), interrogating the forms of agency generated at the interface of movement and stillness, action and passivity, body and language. The provocative statement in the title of the installation

(*When I Was a Plant*) aptly conveys the speculative, imaginative nature of these questions and of possible stories that can be derived from them. Who says these words? The artist, who seeks new forms of subjectivity? Or the monstera hooked up to the machine? Or perhaps someone interacting with the plant via both touch/body and technology? It seems that the story beginning with the words 'When I was a plant…' could be situated in an in-between zone: at the interface of the human and the vegetal, in the imaginary sphere of plant(other)ness.[1] Can we imagine being like a plant? Or being a plant? What does this image presuppose? What does it open up? What does it lead to?

During a discussion with the artist after her talk, her speculative words 'when I was a plant' were contrasted with a firm statement by Theatre 21 actress Aleksandra Skotarek, 'I'm not a plant'. A few months later, this sentence-manifesto took the form of a solo performance, which premiered on 23 April 2023 at the Centre for Inclusive Arts. I read it both as a kind of artistic response and as a personally and socially embedded statement about relations with plants, plant(other)ness and subjectivity.

In 'Crip Kin, Manifesting', Alison Kafer, drawing on the work of Sunaura Tylor, Lisa Bufano and Sandie Yi, interrogates the unorthodox artistic strategies involving the use of technologies stereotypically perceived as compensating for disability-related lacks (such as wheelchairs, leg prostheses or diverse orthoses). In the creative use of these technologies, Kafer sees the potential to explore a singular intertwining of bodies, identities and things, which she perceives through the lens of the notion of 'crip kin'. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of 'kinship', she reflects on its potential to research relationships with the non-human based on the experience of disability (Kafer, 2019). I would like to alter this perspective

slightly and, taking as my starting point Aleksandra Skotarek's performance *I'm Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness* (*Nie jestem rośliną. Strumień świadomości*), to consider how reflection on our relation with plants can contribute to understanding disability. Can we think of these kinds of relations – which, following Haraway, I refer to as relations with significant otherness – as cripping the received semantic field and ideas by activating a perspective combining critical plant studies and Haraway's and Braidotti's feminist materialism? At the same time, Skotarek's performance makes us consider the barriers that reflection on posthuman relationality runs into in confrontation with identity politics that seek the recognition of subjectivity, and how a specific experience of disability reconfigures the field of performance that explores relations with the non-human.

However, rather than begin my reflection on the relationship between the vegetal and the human, between plant(other)ness and disability, by describing the artistic event that provoked this reflection, I will address the theory that the event pointed me to, and which first appeared in my sights in connection with Masaoka's earlier performative installation; the theory that has now reappeared and demanded a reconsideration. The order and temporality of engagement with a work of art and its interpretation is not always clear. Perhaps it was not the performance that pointed me to certain concepts in my search of a theoretical framework for its interpretation. It might have been the other way round: certain notions and theoretical perspectives of post-anthropocentric reflection and new feminist materialisms may have shaped my attitude, affecting not only the kind of questions I asked after engaging with the performance but also my affective response. The latter involved feelings of uncertainty and dismay as well as fascination, prompting a close look at the points of intersection where these emotions arose: the interface of performance and discourses external to it.

So perhaps – starting from the end, which sometimes precedes the beginning/event – it is worth examining the intertwining of the two and what follows from it for the order of interpretation regarding the plant(other)ness question in the context of disability.

There is a reason why I frame this problem like this – pondering the relation between the theoretical and the affective, between speculation and experience, between the position of knowledge and one's own position in relation to someone else's words and experience. Proceeding from the end, I will start by invoking Ariel Modrzyk's proposition made in the context of the relation between humans and plants. Drawing on the notion of care derived from the domain of the emotional and corporeal rather than the rational and intellectual, Modrzyk reflects on the relation between emotion and theory and between body and knowledge (see Modrzyk, 2020). Asking a question that engages issues of plant ethics, or perhaps ethics related to our relation with otherness, 'Do we need theory and knowledge in order to care for the other?', he points out that 'it is emotions that can cause us to want to express something, naming it aptly' (2020, p. 223). The idea is not to privilege one domain over the other or to establish a chronology of knowledge and experience but to differentiate the sources of the two, to show the flows and interrelationships between affective stimulation and its discursive ordering. This gesture, however, entails a broadening of the field of reflection and a reclamation of some sources of knowledge that have at times been depreciated:

> Becoming a plant, that is, blurring the boundaries between the human and the vegetal, might require an appreciation of elements of our functioning such as intuition, emotion and non-discursive corporeal experience, which are not highly valued in sciences. That

> which is excluded from them or behind the scenes might need to be revalued to appreciate modes of vegetal existence (p. 223)

At the same time, a theoretical re-evaluation of the relation between humans and plants enables making the above shift in the domain of knowledge and affective-corporeal experience. On the one hand, Modrzyk seems to say that too much theory can obscure the relation in question. On the other hand, it is a search for a new conceptual framework and its origins that enables co-constituting this relation rather than expressing it.

The reflection on the relation between the human and the vegetal set in motion by Modrzyk resonates remarkably well with the kind of questions set in motion by Skotarek's performance. I will have a closer look at them, according special attention to the elements that best resonate with the artist's performative statement, which provoke one – paradoxically, by revealing deep layers of negativity, which I will address later – to attempt a similar re-evaluation within a specific mode of this relation that includes the experience of disability.

As the author states, 'a multidimensional framing of human-plant relations is in keeping with a processual and relational approach to identity' (2020, p. 214), a clear reference to post-anthropocentric perspectives developed by new materialisms.[2] It is worth noting here that identity so understood is performative in character, as it is not so much given as it is becoming or happening within a certain relation. The processual framing of identity allows the author to remodel the framing of the human–plant relation, shifting away from a perspective foregrounding a fundamental inequality, a hierarchical power structure and domination of humans over the vegetal world towards a more diversified and nuanced view incorporating the aspect

of the human–plant relation linked to the notion of fragility. At the same time, Modrzyk does not seek to deny the devastating impact of humans on the natural world resulting from the adoption of certain ways of classifying and valuing various modes of life, but wants to reflect, on the one hand, on what lies at the root of the desire to control and dominate the natural world, and which manifests through various forms of fear and, on the other, on what may result from a re-evaluation of this relation for the understanding of the process of becoming an other and with an other in the experience of interdependence. Modrzyk distinguishes three types of phobias related to the human–plant relation: the fear of being grown on, the fear of the desert and the fear of vegetation, that is, of becoming plant-like or even becoming a plant. His proposed response to these forms of biophobia, one based on a re-evaluation of our relation with vegetal life forms, is to 'allow ourselves to be grown on' (2020, pp. 223–225). This proposition translates into specific practices that involve, for example, foregoing or partially foregoing the building of tight barriers between the built environment and the natural environment and reducing the temptation to completely control plant growth and spread. It also means accepting the emergence of transitional, hybrid spaces, adopting a different perspective on wasteland and weeds. The proposition to allow oneself to be grown on also has an identity dimension and potential, as it entails rethinking the boundaries of the subject, the very concept of subjectivity and the conditions of the subject's functioning. Instead of thinking about, for example, continuous growth, productivity and efficiency inherent in the idea of controlled cultivation by an active agent (the human being in this case), one can imagine the potential of foregoing total control, of embracing a passivity that enables noticing other forms of activity and agency specific to what used to be perceived as residue of passivity. As Modrzyk puts it, '"Allowing oneself to be grown on" or

“allowing spread” does not necessarily mean doing “more”. It would suffice to do “less” and forego certain fencing practices’ (2020, p. 225). This stance ‘would not […] mean relinquishing boundaries *per se* but changing their status to more negotiable, permeable, contextual and contingent, allowing for more hybrid links and intertwinings of different forms of life’ (ibid.). The identity dimension of this stance involves not only allowing thinking about more processual and hybrid types of subjectivity that derive from relations with otherness but also moving away from the dualist subject/object position typical of a post-Enlightenment perspective. This entails rethinking and deconstructing dualist pairs of notions such as activity and passivity, autonomy and dependence, movement and immobility, as well as life and absence of life, which, in the context of disability, can be recast as living life to the full and living like a plant, ‘vegetating’ as a form of mere survival.

Let’s pause for a moment here, because while the proposition to allow oneself to be grown on, to dare forgo controlling growth and putting constant limits on proliferation, seems to be a response to the first of the biophobias distinguished by Modrzyk, it is not clear whether it is equally relevant to the fear of vegetation, and whether the strategy of negotiating boundaries between humans and plants will have the same potential for re-evaluating the category of identity in the context of that fear. This question seems particularly relevant when dealing with the experience of disability. How relevant is the proposition to allow oneself to be grown on, understood also as tapping the potential of vegetal life forms, for the vegetation–disability relationship? It seems that this proposition reveals all its theoretical and affective potential in situations in which the fear of being like a plant is not only linked with the fear of a potential threat of loss of control and of degradation to a lower life level, which stems from ideas about plants, but with the experience of facing a refusal to have one’s full

subjectivity and humanity recognized. For, theoretically, the proposition of allowing oneself to be grown on, associated with the recognition of the self-existence of plant life forms, may help us take over the derogatory phrase ‘you are a plant’ and crip it in a biodiversity-affirming gesture. On the affective level, however, this may require confronting a tangled web of dark negativity. Aleksandra Skotarek’s performance, whose very title does not convey an affirmation of plant-like forms of existence but a rejection of the plant comparison in a gesture of defending one’s subjectivity, leads the audience through an experience of negativity towards seeking strategies for the emancipation of a disabled identity. Gradually emerging from the initial territory of denial, rejection and negation of the vegetal, however, is what led me – in confrontation with an artistic statement exploring a particular experience – to seek the potential of a rethought human–plant relation for dismantling derogatory stereotypes of disability.

The performance *I’m Not a Plant: A Stream of Consciousness*, directed by Justyna Wielgus, has so far been staged at the Centre for Inclusive Arts in Warsaw. The venue, which used to house a grocery shop, is quite special: it is long and narrow, which imposes limitations while posing a challenge and offering some opportunities. Its size generates (or imposes) an intimate perception owing to the proximity between the audience, seated along the longer sides of the rectangular performance area, and the performer, Aleksandra Skotarek. All artefacts used in the performance, as well as the plants co-present in the space, are right in front of the audience too. In addition, the viewers who face each other are within personal distance of each other. When describing the performance, I consult my memory of that intimate experience as well as video footage and the script written by the dramaturge Justyna Lipko-Konieczna who incorporated the material

improvised in rehearsal by Aleksandra Skotarek and excerpts from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, one of the first inspirations for the piece.

The shorter sides of the performance area are delimited by screens. For most of the performance, one of the screens shows a looped video of an empty white space with a metal hospital bed on which lies an oxygen-mask-wearing female actress hooked up to an IV drip. A similar IV drip stands near the huge monstera in the performance space. Moving in the opposite direction to the screen displaying the image of the body, our gaze lands on the green tangle of the plant's body. At one point, another video starts playing on the other screen, featuring an actress wearing a long skirt and a white lacy brooch-adorned blouse, an outfit akin to those worn by Virginia Woolf. With a mysterious smile, Skotarek saunters among buildings, many of which are surrounded by or overgrown with lush vegetation. At first, we mostly see white walls, neo-classical sculptures, noticeboards and the actress stopping by them. Gradually, however, the camera follows Skotarek towards the leaves and flowers growing on the buildings, showing up close the coexistence of architecture and vegetation. The vegetation is exuberant without seeming rampant or wild. Tended by the human hand, hence subject to control, it is tenderly touched by the actress approaching the leaves and creepers. It seems to have a living presence. This relationship through touch problematizes not only the presence of the plants but also that of the actress who engages in a direct relation with them. This relation is juxtaposed against her relation with the gaze of the passers-by she chances on in front of the gate leading to the building- and plant-filled site seen earlier – the grounds of the University of Warsaw. At the back, opposite the university building, we see another gate, opening onto the courtyard of the Academy of Fine Arts. Superimposed on the footage is projected text from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The first excerpt ends with the telling words

‘Strolling through those colleges […] As I leant against the wall the University indeed seemed a sanctuary in which are preserved rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand.’ (Woolf, 1929) Woolf’s words, which have an ironic ring in the context of her thoughts on men’s and women’s unequal access to education and creative work, and target patriarchal institutions and social organization, take on added significance here. One is struck by the notion of ‘preserved rare types’. Who or what is protected in this particular sanctuary? Who or what is excluded? Are the curious stares that escort the actress to the university gate attracted by her outfit from another era or by the fact that a person with Down’s syndrome is a rare sight on the campus? The limits of accessibility are unclear here – the campus remains open,[3] but Skotarek does not enter any of the university buildings. She walks around the campus, interacting with the surroundings. She touches the plants, which, as we’ve just learnt, touch her in a special way.

Each of the spaces evoked here is weighted with meaning, both symbolic and institutional. On the one hand there’s the hospital, on the other the university. Stretching between them is the zone of theatre and play where the relation with plant(other)ness is being negotiated. Before seeing the spaces in the videos, we look at the space of the performative actions performed among the plants dotted around, immersing ourselves in the stream of words spoken her actress, which we hear in our headphones throughout the show. The titular stream of consciousness begins even before the actress enters the performance space:

> When a baby is born with a genetic defect, does it grow shoots and roots? When my professor saw me, did he pick up a book and open it to a page about vegetation? He’s published over a hundred

> papers and academic textbooks… I can imagine him walk up to my mother and say: ‘The baby I’ve just brought into the world has a genetic defect, the baby will be a plant’, ‘a plant unaware of anything’, the baby has Down’s syndrome…, mental retardation, a closed mind. The baby won’t be mentally functional… (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

We are immediately plunged into the midst of the fear of vegetation, of being like a plant, of being a plant, which Modrzyk recognizes as one of the main forms of biophobia. Skotarek ushers us into a story where this fear takes root in a specific body, but the response is not the passivity stereotypically associated with plants; rather, it is a firm resistance and a complex process of negotiation with plant(other)ness in the process of constituting one’s identity.

The fear of being a plant is not visually represented by an image related to flora: it is neither rampant weeds nor a solitary specimen of a species struggling to survive in the desert. The fear of being like a plant, of being a plant, is distinct from the fear of being grown on and of desertification, of excess and lack. Its status is different, although, in a sense, it reflects both excess and lack at the same time. The performance includes the most pervasive projection of this fear, which has social roots: the image of the body lying in the hospital bed shown on the first screen (to fully convey the stereotyped fear, I should have written ‘the image of the bed-bound body’). Complimenting this image, seen on the screen for most of the performance, is the oxygen mask on the actress’s face, the IV and the empty and sterile white interior. This makes the image extremely evocative, even though the actress remains still and silent, or perhaps because of this: it amplifies the affective message, which invokes the fear – rooted in stereotypical ideas – of

both excess of matter and scarcity of life. This ambivalence pertains to the ideas of vegetal life and thus in the fear of vegetation evoked here.

Such ideas have a long pedigree in Western culture. ‘The assumed lack of complexity characteristic of higher life forms positions plants on the lowest rung of the ladder of life, between the inanimate world and the animal world’, notes Magdalena Zamorska (2022, p. 200), adding that, according to Aristotle,

> the tripartite human soul (the psyche means spirit, soul, life, vital energy, potency, power) is composed of the plant (or vegetal, or nourishing) soul marked only by its capacity for unlimited growth and multiplication, the animal soul, endowed with the ability to feel, experience and move, and the human soul, capable of thinking, speaking and reasoning (2022, p. 200).

Derived from Aristotle’s concept, this hierarchy of life forms invokes the category of consciousness, which is differentiating in character and intertwined with the capacity to think, speak and reason, which thinking, speaking and reasoning regarded as activities of the self-conscious self.

‘This baby will be a plant, a plant unaware of anything’, the audience hears the actress say in their headphones, quoting the words of the doctor present at her birth. The same voice adds,

> Are plants in the Himalayas different? Do plants in the Himalayas have retardation in their minds?
> Professor Lech Korniszewski, my professor, my Himalayan climber. The first to teach genetics in Poland, at the Medical Academy in

> Warsaw. He went on ten climbing expeditions in the Himalayas. What kind of plant did he see in me? Naked? I was born naked. Did he see naked plant life?

The first sentences the audience hears in their headphones at the start of the performance, which open the titular stream of consciousness, seem to refer to facts from the actress's life but at the same time have a phantasmagorical side to them, amplified by the somewhat dream-like nature of the images evoked by what Skotarek does on stage. She enters the performance space dressed in a flowery dressing gown, a long striped black-and-white scarf, a winter cap, and ski goggles over her eyes. Wearing cross-country skis on her feet, she moves slowly but steadily along the narrow space, right past the audience seated on either side, carefully navigating around the numerous potted plants placed all over the floor. She then lifts one of the plants off the floor before carrying it towards a stylized sofa located under the screen displaying the image of the hospital bed. The sofa is covered with a fabric featuring generic painting scenes against a background of lush vegetation. The actress takes off her winter clothes and accessories, stands with her legs wide apart and places the potted plant between them. She tilts her head back and starts taking deep breaths. This image echoes the birth scene mentioned before, but Skotarek does not so much invoke her mother as becomes at once the one giving birth and the one being born, while the plant, which she removes from between her legs to stroke it, cuddle and hold to her breast, is both her and not her. The plant is the unwanted, rejected diagnosis and the part of her self that demands care and tenderness. However, the journey from the plant-diagnosis to the relation with one's own plant(other)ness is neither easy nor straightforward. What might be the purpose of this journey and what is at stake in the effort involved?

Referencing feminist plant studies, Zamorska notes,

> The philosophical practices that model human thinking on vegetal modes of being are, from the perspective of the feminist ethic of care, less relevant than a concern for the visibility and well-being of specific, material and embodied beings. The starting point of feminist plant studies is to recognize the ontological and political status of plants (2022, p. 203).

Can such an essentially feminist rethinking of the status of plants, which takes into account their specific ontology and politicity, lead to the development of not only a new ethics of care for vegetal beings but also a new ethics based on relationality and interdependence with otherness conceived no longer in terms of binary differences but as a spectrum of diversity? And can this be done based not so much on 'model[ling] human thinking on vegetal modes of being' but on remodelling our thinking on our relation with plant(other)ness and all 'otherness'? This is the direction in which Zamorska's argument is going. She notes,

> from a critical and feminist perspective, new stories and new speculations are needed from which a different multi-genre politics and ethics can emerge, one based on care and thoughtfulness. In keeping with the proposition to craft new stories for a new world, storytellers and listeners propose narratives and ideas going beyond what was acceptable and conceivable in the modern paradigm. Only thinking differently enables one to act differently. (2022, pp. 209-210)

Then she reaches her main conclusion:

> Plant(other)ness offers a model for thinking-differently, being-differently. […] Other stories enable us to ask other questions about how to act; questions about what action will be the best for all beings involved in a particular situation (2022, p. 210).

I consider Skotarek's performance as this kind of feminist story, a feminist action that sets in motion narratives going beyond what has been conceivable. Her perspective, however, is special – it interweaves feminist elements with the experience of disability, so that plant(other)ness can be framed as a model of thinking-differently and being-differently in a process of cripping the stereotypical notions of plant(other)ness-and-disability that manifest in the form of the plant-diagnosis.

Skotarek's stream-of-consciousness heard in the audience's headphones accompanies the actresses' next performative actions. She leaves the performance space for a few moments to take a shower. Then she returns with her hair wrapped in a towel before wiping her wet hair with it. Her movements are calm and precise, her gestures combine into a choreography that is accompanied by words increasingly revolving around the body, taking care of it, perceiving and experiencing it. Various forms of phrase 'I'm not a plant' crop up. At times her words are emphatic and tinged with irritation stemming from defiance: 'I'm not a plant. Plant, you've got holey leaves. Plant, give me a break. Don't torture me' (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023). At other times they take the form of firm yet patient explanations of difference: 'Plant, this is my life. Plant, don't take away my rights, I won't let you shape me, I am of human needs' (ibid.). This repeated attempt at

differentiation is a struggle for the recognition of one's autonomy. It plays out in the performance space and through performance, in both action and language, with theatre as its medium:

> I can see my body, I can see my hands, my arms, I can see myself, I can see my emerald hair, I can see my legs, my feet, I move my body in different ways, I dance in front of the mirror, I shape my hands in movements, my arms move, my whole body celebrates itself in front of the mirror… I move my head in different ways too, I have a body that is soft, agile, capable of stage movement. […] I'm not a plant. Plants don't perform in the theatre, their movements are not stage movements… (ibid.).

The actress speaking to the plant and indirectly addressing it with her actions (the actions are the primary platform for difference building) is an ambiguous element of this struggle/play. The culturally entrenched opposition between action and passivity inherent in the human–plant relation is revisited here. Skotarek variously shows that she can move, dance and act whereas the plant cannot dance and remains still. This difference is repeatedly stressed but often breaks down. Its underpinning has to be recreated time and again. This is evident in the persistence with which the actress rejects the vegetal, which she hates, fears and regards as a source of shame and loneliness. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the I–plant opposition is not so clear-cut, that what the actress rejects about plants is mostly society's ideas about them, which take the form of the plant-diagnosis:

> Plant, you hurt my words. I just avoid you. You were my diagnosis. I

> don’t want to be you. I live my life my way. It’s a strange situation, that plant. People don’t need plants. They only have plants at home because they look nice. I don’t have plants at home. They bring me fear, shame (ibid.).

The words describing the negative affects invoked by the plant-diagnosis are accompanied by gestures made near the potted plants or involving them, most of which express care and tenderness, as in the metaphorical birth scene or the numerous moments when the actress waters the plants, touches their leaves gently, strokes them or buries her face in the leaves in the crying scene. The plant (in the general sense of the word) inhabits the space of negation, but it also becomes a kind of partner in a play the artist engages in, in which the question of identity is at stake. At one point, the actress voices a provocative, pained indictment of a society that cultivates the vision of the plant-diagnosis, which ensures its persistence:

> What do you think of me, my society?
> You see Down’s syndrome. You see what I cannot have. You see a broken mind that doesn’t think, full of delusions. A mind that is boggled. A mind-moron. A mind-crap. A mind-fuckwit. A dumb mind. A loony mind. […] You’ve got everything made up about me. But my mind is only mine – personal. Should I be ashamed of myself?
> Plant, why do you break my peace? Why do you disturb my life? (ibid.).

The plant becomes a byword for stereotypical disability. Is it possible to somehow include it in the process of constructing an identity with disability

as an essential part of it? ‘How might those who have experienced medicalized technologies as forms of neglect, intervention, and surveillance begin to cultivate alternative relations to technology?’, asks Alison Kafer (2019, p. 1)[4]. Can this question be transposed to make it relevant for the questions of vegetation? Let’s try. How can those who have experienced comparisons to plants in the form of negation, influence and control cultivate alternative relations to vegetation? The idea is not to compare the technology world with the vegetal world but to try to frame a question centred on imagining relations with various forms of otherness in the extra-human realm that are capable of countering the negativity with new visions of subjectivity.

On another level, however, the juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible elements that emerges from this transposition: medical technologies or medicalized interventions versus linguistic operations involving comparisons to plants, i.e. symbolic interventions, unveils something unexpected, which is revealed in the light of Skotarek’s performance. ‘This baby will be a plant’, says the doctor in the actress’s narrative, and these words are not a mere comparison or metaphor but a paramedical diagnosis. The vegetal diagnosis, or the plant-diagnosis, produces the fear of being like a plant, of ‘vegetating’. In Skotarek’s performance the fear is reflected in the vision of the hospital bed and medical apparatus to which a body-plant is hooked up. In this vision, the fear of being like a plant is inextricably linked to the fear of dependency on life-support technology. Being a plant overlaps with being a cyborg. But as we have known since Donna Haraway’s famous essay, the cyborg is a highly ambiguous figure, and its ambivalence and hybridity have the potential of undercutting stagnant, ossified meanings and dualist oppositions.

Alison Kafer reminds us that Haraway's cyborg has not only become a figure associated with feminist emancipation but has also significantly contributed to reflection in the domain of the body and technology in disability studies (2019, p. 5). As the author points out, however, it is reasonable to ask to what extent the cyborg still remains a viable emancipation figure. In lieu of the cyborg, Kafer proposes another notion of Haraway, which recurs in Haraway's later writings and manifestos, that of kinship, and she reflects on its relevance for the relations the artists she discusses build with inanimate matter and technology, which, in the light of their work, are not so much meant to fill the presumed 'lack' associated with disability but to expand and reconfigure the understanding of the body and matter in their mutual relation.

The notion of kinship, which refers to close relationships of choice and to relations not based on biological kinship, is situated close to Haraway's other notions, such as companion species or naturecultures. Nor is it far removed from the figure of the cyborg. In her 'Companion Species Manifesto', Haraway points out that the cyborg of her early manifestos has not been displaced by other figures but has become one among a number of modalities of hybridized relations that can emerge between the human and the non-human (2012, pp. 4-5).

The shift from the figure of the cyborg to the notion of companion species, naturecultures and kinship, however, marks a shift in thinking from the realm of technology towards broadly understood environments and ecosystems, matter and materiality. New feminist materialism on the one hand, relational ethics on the other. Both these currents are developing within the post-anthropocentric movement and both stress the need to rethink the categories of subject and object, the boundaries between them,

and the questions of representation, agency and autonomy. This requires a rethinking of the human, the non-human and the more-than-human, and thus a reconfiguration of the notion of ‘the human being’.

In her performance, Aleksandra Skotarek invokes a classic figure of the human, a vision of the human body and its position (physical position and position in the world). She enters the performance space carrying a yoga mat, which she spreads between the plants and performs breathing exercises while making sweeping movements with her head, sending her wet hair aflutter. A moment later, she gets up and stands with her legs wide apart, her arms outstretched to the sides. She remains in this position for a long time despite the effort involved. Skotarek superimposes the image of the well-known *Vitruvian Man* onto her yoga practice, provoking complex reflection about the human body. The voice in the audiences’ headphones says,

> The circle is a collection of all body parts, of different psychological, sociological and professorial attitudes. Everyone has their own circle. In my feminine circle I have my proportions, the proportions of my body and my identity, you cannot break free from this circle. I’d like to raise banners up high, but one has to stand still! (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

The final words in this excerpt invoke a scene from another production of Theatre 21, *The Revolution That Wasn’t*, in which actors raised banners and placards brought from a protest of people with disabilities and their caregivers in the Polish Parliament in 2018. The protest in that show involved a similar effort to that made by Skotarek in her performance and

included the chant ‘Rise your arms, strong legs’. In *The Revolution That Wasn’t*, the stillness was a gesture of protest, but here it represents a body trapped in a certain position/pattern. Is it possible to break free from it? We hear Skotarek’s voice saying,

> Leonardo Da Vinci created this circle and put the human being in it. Each one of us has their own circle, drawn with various elements in it. A circle must be drawn around plants, around different shapes of plants. Plants can be encircled too. I see Leonardo draw this circle and encircle it (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023),

Her vision is evocative and alluring: instead of a single model it offers a multiplicity of geometric figures around various forms and shapes, which encompass diverse bodies, including plant bodies. Then the actress sits down on her mat, assuming a new yoga pose, which is more comfortable than the previous one and can be held for an extended period of time:

> The hands can be linked together, meaning closed, like my body – my body with its plantness, though I’m not a plant.
> The body is closed in a circle, you sit, stuck for the rest of your existence (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

Was it then that the stark difference between the plant-diagnosis and plant(other)ness first struck me? The thought then gradually evolved as the show unfolded.

In her essay on posthumanist relational subjectivity, Rosi Braidotti points to the moment of challenging the classic quasi-universal figure of the human

being represented by the normative image of the male white body-and-subject as key for the construction of new identities and affirmative politics. 'Hardly a universal position', she reminds us, pointing to the posthumanist turn as marking a significant shift in thought towards the hybridization of genres (Braidotti, 2013, p. 5). For her, the shift away from classic anthropocentrism means a turn towards relationality and interdependence, which makes it possible to redefine the very category of life (*zoe*), including the nonhuman and non-personal in it (Braidotti 2013, p. 15). On the one hand, Braidotti calls attention to the entire field of necropolitics, which makes us realize that we are all humans, though some are definitely more mortal than others and we share this vulnerability with animals and plants' (ibid.). On the other hand, she seeks to develop a new affirmative politics capable of transcending the experience of negativity (including negative affects) to focus on building new, creative links.

> What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed.
> This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. […] Affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming. […] Negative passions do not merely destroy the self, but also harm the self's capacity to relate to others – both human and non-human others, and thus to grow in and through others (2013, p. 15).

Can a shift towards an affirmation of relationality with the other, both human and non-human, occur in light of the experience invoked in Skotarek's performance?

Let’s return to the *Vitruvian Man* scene. In its conclusion, the actress quits her pose, crawls out of the ‘circle’ area and ‘gets out of herself’ getting down on her hands and knees with her head lowered and hair covering her face. She weaves her way slowly among the plants, swaying her hips and making ape-like noises before getting up, with her face still covered, approaching the largest plant and beginning to stroke its flower. While she does this, the light pulsates and the music responds to her movements. The audience hears the following words, repeated twice, in their headphones: ‘To break free from a structure ill-suited to a body outside the norm, a body that has shaped my life, even though I’m not a plant’ (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023). On the one hand, the actress invokes cultural stereotypes: the human-animal appears alongside the human-plant. On the other, her transgression of normativity takes place on Skotarek’s terms, being fully aware of the connotations of the evoked images and without shame. While the actress shows what the society has ‘made up’ about her, she takes over these images through choreographing and creative transformation.

The impact of this gesture is reinforced in the final sequence of the show in which the actress, covered with loose sheets of paper, sits at the table and begins writing in response to the extensive Woolf quote about women’s artistic work. The quote was displayed moments before, superimposed on the footage of the actress strolling through the campus, while Skotarek lay on the chaise longue with the monstera at its head. The actress then takes the tube of the green liquid IV and tapes it to her hand. From my seat, the plant seemed to be hooked up to the drip as well. When the quote disappears from the screen, Skotarek unhooks the drip and moves to the opposite end of the space, near the other screen, pushing the monstera on a moving platform. She buries her head into the plant’s leaves and begins to sob loudly, while the audience hears the words ‘please understand, I am of

human needs’. Then, the crying stops and Skotarek sits at a small table with a smaller plant on it, the one she stroked in the Himalaya birth scene. She scribbles something on paper sheets before tossing them away. The verbal stream in the headphones continues. The following words stand out:

> I’ll be a plant, piss off, fuck you all. I can cry alone. I can sit in a room alone. Fuck what you want, what you know of me, what you know of my imbecility. […] I’ll be a plant because my thoughts about you overwhelm me, I’ll be a plant because I’ve got more in common with them than with you. Plants feel lonely when they are alone in a room, without water, without life. I am lost in solitude with my plantness (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

The scene that involves writing and female creativity is bizarrely in sync with the scene in which animal and plant otherness was performed. The actress steps up the strategy of the creative takeover of cultural norms and images in a gesture that has both a feminist dimension (previously explicitly expressed: ‘In theatre, I deconstruct the woman taboo without censoring, without sanitizing, without a model, without a body that needs to be protected AGAINST HURT’; Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023), and a crip one (she dismantles the social fiction about herself and her disability, exposing the gaze of those who have ‘everything made up’ about her). Yet this play with restricting norms does not result in a straightforward subversion or an unproblematic affirmation of the relation with otherness. It does, however, suggest that the relation is possible by creatively rejecting the hurtful on the way to building a person’s feminine and disabled identity on her own terms. Can this be attained through a new relationality with the other, with the vegetal? This would certainly require taking a huge effort

and surpassing the Himalayas of negativity. And it will not happen unless we reconfigure our ideas of otherness and our relation with otherness in the social realm. I regard Skotarek's performance as a laboratory of this sort of transformation of the social realm – she seems to be saying: society, now it's your turn to work on your imagination to dream up new subversive images, new relations, new identities based on relations of interdependence and co-responsibility for building affirmative fields of diversity.

Ultimately, Skotarek finds an answer to the harmful plant-diagnosis:

> My wanting to be a plant, to be, to last, to feel the pleasant touch of leaves. We are so similar, really. That doctor didn't understand plants and he didn't understand people. I hated plants because of that doctor. For a long time, I wasn't able to live because of those plants. I wasn't able to love because of those plants (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

At the same time, Skotarek's answer is an artistic response to Masaoka's performative talk: 'I will write a book on plant sexuality', she says, prompting a series of questions about how plants feel and engage in relationships and then a series of actions involving one of the plants, which ceases to be a mere diagnosis and begins to be treated like a part of Skotarek's self. However, to engage in a new relation with the plant-oneself, one has to reject not only the socially constructed stereotype that forms part of the image of the plant-diagnosis but also a certain part of oneself related to the idea of the human, which is sometimes regarded as the essence of humanity: human consciousness:

> I want to say goodbye to my consciousness of what you think of me, of what you know about me, of what you've made up about me. I can't believe that I can say goodbye to it, to my consciousness, that I have to stop living by my ideas. Should I be ashamed of my desires? You are pretty, with multi-colour stripes. You are beautiful in these colours, all the colours of your subtleness, femininess, plantness. To say goodbye to all consciousness, to what I've got inside … Goodbye my consciousness… Hello plantness… (Skotarek, Lipko-Konieczna, 2023).

Can this declaration be taken as an affirmation of plant(other)ness? Not really. Skotarek does not give clear-cut answers, because what is at stake here is a quest for new formulas of identity as well as an ongoing play with ideas and expectations. For just when it seems that Skotarek is opening the door to a rethinking of the question of identity in the spirit of post-anthropocentric relativity, she once again provocatively evokes the images of the plant-diagnosis and a plant-like, 'vegetating' body. Her farewell to hurtful stereotypes is accompanied by a farewell to her former self. Does this have to mean giving up? Or accepting the negative formula of non-being that seemed to have been surpassed? Having said goodbye to everything and everyone, the actress lies down in the middle of the performance space among the plants, puts on an oxygen mask and assumes a pose reminiscent of that seen in the hospital-bed video. The gesture seems to say: you wanted to see a plant in me, so here it is. But this image has already been surpassed. Or perhaps it has only been countered by other images – the possible, potential, sought-after alternatives that can only come about through new stories. Stories in the spirit of relational feminism.

Reflecting on the herbarium in Luce Irigaray's feminist thought, Katarzyna

Szopa reminds us that the philosopher

> emphasizes that plants can teach us how to live together without taking away from each other the air (and other natural resources), space, freedom, the unrestrained right to appear and to articulate the peculiarities of one's corporeality (Szopa, 2024).

And, referring to Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, in which the thinker refers to the plant world too, she adds,

> the mutual recognition of sexual difference makes it possible to cultivate life and respect the worth of other living beings without the need to renounce one's subjective economy, which in practice opens the door to any underrepresented entities and minorities and expands the 'framework of recognition' that offers a political structure to an arena of representation, and decides what life is and what it is not in keeping with certain norms, enabling the flourishing and appearance of various forms of embodied othernesses (Szopa, 2024).

The feminist perspective adopted here is informed by vegetal metaphors deployed in order to rethink difference and affirm diversity, while a rethinking of the question of difference makes enables a new perspective on various forms of otherness, including extra-human otherness.

In the last sequence of the footage featuring the hospital bed in *I'm Not a Plant*, the actress is seen entering the space dressed as Virginia Woolf, bringing together two opposite images, two different views of the body.

Skotarek/Woolf reads another excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*while standing right next to (the footage of) herself lying motionless in bed. The excerpt concerns the prospect of the coming of Shakespeare's sister:

> As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while (Woolf).

These words, which are the last words of the performance, take on a new meaning in light of the story about self-consciousness and plantness. What is at stake here is an identity intertwined with creative freedom. An identity that has a social dimension but can be negotiated in the creative realm. At its centre is the human being – the woman – the creative subject – the artist. The actoress, as Skotarek likes to call herself. An identity that is processual and open. One that goes against cultural stereotypes but also demonstrates that surpassing them can offer more than just a sense of autonomy and agency, even if this occurs only within the theatre. The human self is at stake here, but the play triggered by Skotarek opens up questions about other potential forms of relational identities. Perhaps the starting point on the way towards diversity should be to forgo limited metaphors and ideas about plants, animals and other others used as a negative point of reference. Let's revisit Zamorska's words on plant ethics again: 'Only thinking differently enables one to act differently'. Undoubtedly, a feminist view of plant(other)ness, which resonates and sometimes clashes with Skotarek's performative statement, supports the work of undercutting stereotypes and

can potentially open up new ways of thinking about disability in creative relations with otherness. Except that, in the theatre, the process of change moves in the opposite direction: only acting differently enables one to think differently.

Translated by Mirosław Rusek

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Footnotes

1. I take the Polish term *rośl-inność* from Magdalena Zamorska, who notes that she has

borrowed it from a cover title of the magazine *Czas Kultury*, 2008, no. 5 (Zamorska, 2020, pp. 43-62). *Roślinność* means ‘vegetation’. *Inność* is Polish for ‘otherness’.
2. The author makes an explicit reference to Donna Haraway in a footnote, but I think this reference can be extended to include other new-materialist accounts of the relation with significant otherness, such as the one proposed by Karen Barad.
3. As I finish writing this article, the campus of the University of Warsaw is no longer as open as it used to be. The head of the university, Alojzy Nowak, has made it obligatory for students to present a student ID on entering the university grounds. The decision came on the back of pro-Palestinian student protests.
4. Kafer, A. (2019). ‘Crip kin, manifesting’, *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, 5(1), pp. 1–37

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