

What Wood I Be:

The im/possibilities of intra-acting with a wooden pallet

Drawing from the process of creation, live performance, and aftermath of my piece *What Wood I Be* (2023), this essay explores methods for building alliances between human and non-human bodies through intra-actions. The performance involved the body of a wooden pallet and my own body, in a series of movements, vibrations and displacements that sought to become intra-actions in the process. The work was created in the context of the *Body in Performance* module from the Master Performance Practices at ArtEZ University, and performed in front of an audience at the Papillae Festival that took place at the institution. The driving force behind the creation of this performance was to investigate mutual agencies between the human and the non-human. For that reason, I borrowed the neologism of 'intra-action' coined by feminist studies theorist Karen Barad, as a way of signifying "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad, 2007, p. 33) between the pallet and me. Through attempting to embody these intra-actions in performance, two main problems arised. The main one is how an intra-action can be actually materialized, performed, and made specific. As in the moment of the performance I had not fully investigated that aspect, I found myself oscillating between moments where the intra-action was actually happening and moments where a psychological projection into the object took place. Consequently, while these projections were performed, the role of the pallet in the piece was diminished, posing a very important problem,

considering that this work is aimed at exploring the notion of intra-action with a non-human body. The second problem is related to the agency of a non-human body who is not capable of generating movement by themselves. If I claim that I am working towards acknowledging and fostering the emergence of both human and non-human agency through the performative intra-action, I realize that I have to develop strategies in order to not just manipulate the object. Moreover, I also need to question if the agency emerges only by movement or if it can also happen in stillness. In the following sections of this essay, I focus on these problems of intra-action and non-human agency that emerged from working on my performance *What Wood I Be*, with the intention of coming up with a series of principles of practice that can help to move the work forward.

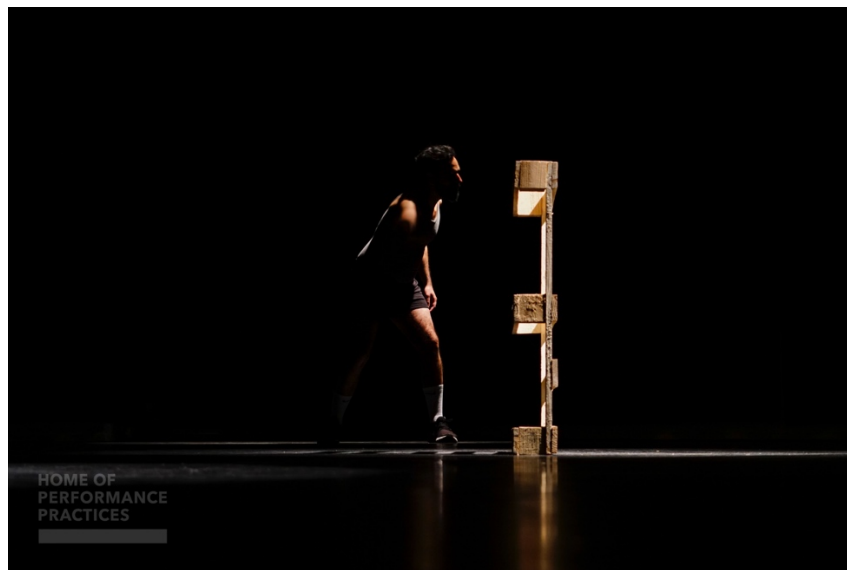


Figure 1. *What Wood I Be* (2023).

Performer Feli Navarro, photograph by Fenia Kotsopoulou.

The object as a body

In the context of my current artistic research, I am interested in exploring the ecological entanglements between the human and the more-than-human, by investigating how their intra-actions can be performed. Although my first experiments within the research came about outdoors in a forest, something

happened in the studio one day that changed the direction of the work dramatically. In the beginning of the week when me and my peers were starting to devise our performances, we entered the studio that we were going to use, and we were struck by the situation in the room. The whole space was a mess and full of stuff from another group: large black plastic garbage bags, a mannequin, a pile of tables and chairs, mountains of dust, more and more props, and then... a wooden pallet. The pallet was there, all alone, standing on their narrowest side, and really close to one of the walls of the studio, forming a fifteen degrees angle with it. Although they were not one of those big pallets, they looked healthy and strong, even if they were missing one of their wood strips. I acknowledged their presence at first, but nothing more, since I was a bit nervous because I had to present my first idea for the performance, and I knew that something was missing. What I did not expect is that it was *someone* who was missing, and not *something*. I looked at them again and I felt as if the wooden pallet looked me in the eyes and said, 'I want to work with you, you need to work with me'. So I took their invitation and I decided at that very moment that we were going to work and intra-act together. And this is how our relationship started, the pallet chose me whilst I was keeping myself available for surprise within the creative process itself. The first approximation towards the intra-action I was looking for, started there.

Suddenly, all the expectations that I had of working with trees, plants, mushrooms, or soil in my research were exceeded by this human-made non-human body. And the question of how a wooden pallet could become an actual body with their own agency and subjectivity in my performance turned out to be of major importance. Furthermore, stemming from the potential inequalities that come to light through the intra-actions between the pallet and me, there are aspects in terms of ethics and power that need to be looked at. In that sense,

considering that, as performance artist, professor, and researcher Pavlos Kountouriotis states, “(i)t is in the body that modern society has invested to exercise its disciplinarian authority” (Kountouriotis, 2012), it is necessary to be aware of the possible disciplines and authorities that live within the performance. In that regard, manipulation, objectification, and subjugation may appear in the relationship with the pallet. For understanding how subjectivity takes place according to French philosopher Michel Foucault, Kountouriotis explains:

[...] subjectivity is the amalgamated product of a dual process: it is not simply the process of subjectification -the edification of a new entity or the creation of a new identity- that constructs our self but most importantly that of subjugation - the subordination of an identity to the disciplinarian regimes of a given society. (Kountouriotis, 2012)

Since the performance *What Wood I Be* seeks to embrace the notion of intra-action with a non-human body, it is essential for me to consider the politics of subjectivity performed by the pallet and me. Becoming a subject then, it is relying not only in the mutual acknowledgment of our subjectification -pallet’s and mine-, but in the negotiation of the possible subjugations that get materialized through our intra-actions. For example, different ways of moving the pallet can install hierarchies of power where they become subjugated to me as a performer. Additionally, if I take into account how the pallet invited me to perform with them, and all the amount of work that followed -including this essay- I can also examine the ways in which I may be subjugated to them. In that sense, an intra-action is not always going to be democratic, respectful, or egalitarian, and can take shape in violent, exploitative, or authoritarian ways. The interesting aspect of these situations is not to suppress those unbalanced circumstances, but to find a place within the performance in which conflictive intra-actions can spark new inquiries. The becomings of the wooden pallet as a subject and a body, are not trivial at all, but thinking of them as another

performer, can pave the way a little. When the wooden pallet is seen as a rightful performer, capable of claiming their own space in the work, a possibility opens of questioning the usual extractivist consideration of objects in the performing arts as mere props of disposable matter which, apart from being used, hold no value. To quote performance artist and researcher Anushka Nair,

Regarding objects as passive, non-affective, and enslaved by solely functional roles comes from a narcissistic human exceptionalism fuelled by separatist thoughts, which act as defences for retaining control to protect the illusion of a subject untouched and not limited to forces of materiality. (Nair, 2021, p. 57)

When the human perception of an object changes towards being a subject and a body, there is the opportunity then, for the human body to gain an enhanced sensation of materiality. The risk of recovering this feeling of materiality is to get in touch with the fears and worries of the body's fleshness, vulnerability, and mortality, but this may also come accompanied by a heightened renewed excitement of being alive. In this sense, affection and vulnerability suddenly become a terrain in which the relation between the performer and the non-human body can take place. But when "it is not possible for the body to be productive, unless adapted in a system of subjugation" (Kountouriotis, 2012), the duty of the artist committed to work with a non-human body is to question constantly their systems of production at work, in order to ensure that subjugation does not take place in a default manner. For that reason, I am interested in creating the conditions that provide "the possibility for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity" (Jones, 1998). To find those possibilities for radical engagements, in the next sections of the essay I analyze the notions of intra-action and non-human agency in the context of my performance *What Wood I Be*.

Three modes of intra-acting with non-human bodies

What Wood I Be was performed in a black-box type of setting, mostly dark, with four spotlights that broke the darkness of the space. There was a spotlight in the center of the space and the other three were equally placed around it, leaving one of them at the back of the stage. Throughout the performance I used the different spotlights as places where the intra-actions were taking place, following a sequence of different dispositions and movements between the pallet and me. The emergence of the pallet's agency and mine through intra-action, implies that these agencies "don't exist as individual elements", as they are "only distinct in a relational, not absolute sense" (Barad, 2007, p. 33). As an artist-researcher, I saw this clearly occurring when I rested one of the corners of the pallet on the ground, having the opposite corner on my right hand, and, standing on my right foot only, I rolled the pallet in circles using both points of support. Reviewing the video documentation material as an observer, I can appreciate that the intra-action of rolling the body of the pallet changed our physicality in a manner that a different sense of agency popped up, one that was only possible in the contact, exchange, and gravity that we were sharing as performers. The pallet, while rolling, looked lighter, malleable, and somehow able to shapeshift and decide where to go next, in constant dialogue with my body who felt slightly out of balance but firm and decided. Performance artist and researcher Annette Arlander, who has worked extensively on intra-action performing with landscapes, says that "(b)odies are not simply situated or located in particular environments", but rather "environments and bodies are intra-actively co-constituted" (Arlander, 2014). Even though that co-constitution was taking place at certain points of the performance, there were other moments where my psychological projection into the object took over, overshadowing the role of the pallet as a performer of the piece. In the context of this work, the psychological projections were palpable

when, while performing, I assigned my own thoughts, judgements, memories or emotions to the pallet, as if they were coming from them. The clearest examples of these projections were made evident through the use of language. For the duration of the performance, I was improvising a text based partly on what came out in the rehearsals, but also keeping it open to new words that could be pronounced as a result of the intra-actions. Some of these words brought valuable information to the piece, such as saying 'through' while throwing my arm across the body of the pallet, denouncing the dimensions of space politics of the intra-action. Besides, I was also surprised to pronounce 'one more time' after each rolling of the pallet, as I felt –very subjectively, but still a valid feeling– that these words were thought by the pallet and uttered by me. On the other hand, some words appeared only because of this psychological projection, such as 'a beautiful tree', coming out while feeling pity for the pallet, for their eventual past as a tree, imposing my own narrative of nostalgia to the intra-action and, thus, transforming it into a much more superficial interaction instead. Therefore, I identify the need to train the ability of differentiating my own projections from the genuine sensations that the intra-action brings. According to Anushka Nair, "building a contractual relation in an intra-active encounter with objects requires the conditions of labour, endurance and duration" (Nair, 2021, p. 37). So it is not only about the conceptual operations of the performance, but also about setting a framework of agreements between the pallet-as-performer and myself. Whether that would materialize in a written list or even a performance score, this attention and awareness towards the non-human body must encourage "relation-building with objects through hospitality and care, to enable spaces for response-ability and negotiations in our encounters" (Nair, 2021, p. 37).

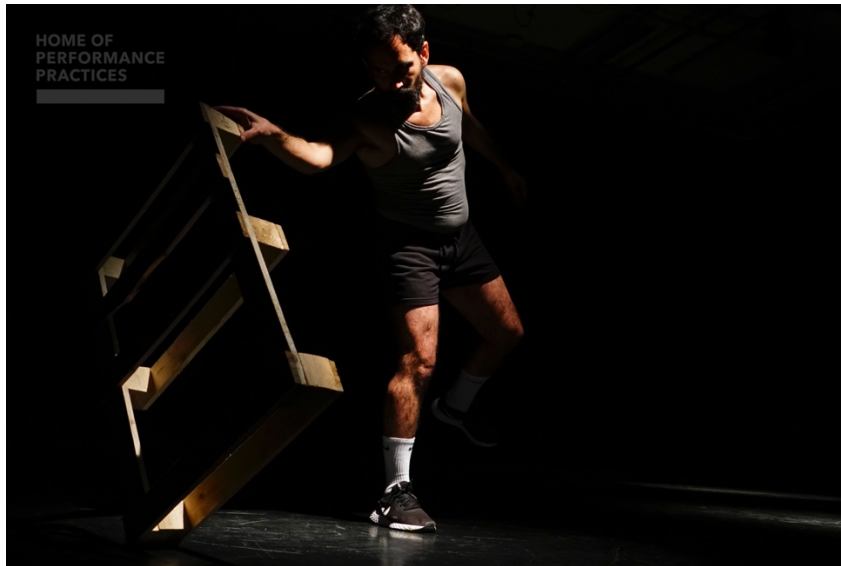


Figure 2. *What Wood I Be* (2023).

Performer Feli Navarro, photograph by Fenia Kotsopoulou.

After a careful analysis of several examples from performance artists and theorists, I have assembled three different modes that can be used when working with intra-action and a non-human body:

- Up and Down
- Inside/Outside
- Still (in Movement)

“Up and Down” responds to what artist and scholar Emma Cocker defines as a “Sisyphean practice”, drawing from the myth of Sisyphus who, out of his disrespect for the gods, was punished with “rolling a rock to the top of a mountain only for it to then roll back down again” (Cocker, 2016). In her writing, Cocker does a thorough review of how diverse performance artists from the 1960s onwards, “appear locked into some hapless or hopeless Sisyphean endeavour” (Cocker, 2016). In that sense, the frustration of the non-successful materialization of intra-actions in my performance is very much related with the notion of a maneuver that constantly fails in its accomplishment and needs to start over and over. Hence, embracing this characteristic as part of the work

seems essential as “a tactic for avoiding definitive declarations or decisions that could then disable the potentiality of the situation” (Cocker, 2016). In other words, I see the Sisyphean approach as an antidote against the surge of psychological projections that I was explaining earlier in the text. One example that illustrates this “Up and Down” mode is Belgian artist Francis Alÿs’ work *Rehearsal 1* (1999-2004), where he films the multiple attempts of a Volkswagen car going up a hill in Tijuana. For this to be achieved in my performance, I would have to work further in ways of infusing clarity to the task at hand, and how the different kinds of failures can emerge from that for the task to be repeated.

The “Inside/Outside” mode is related to how the non-human body can affect and have a consequence in my own body and vice versa, internally, and externally. An example of this is how performance artist Anushka Nair, in her performance installation *Roo(u)ting* (2021), transforms the physicality of beetroots grating them and, by doing that, the internal water from beetroots gets into her skin, coloring her hands and arms. Nair also drinks the water resulting from the grating process, letting the changes in the beetroot alter herself also internally. Also, Yann Marussich in his performance *Bleu Remix* (2007) shows a possibility of “Inside/Outside” by emanating a blue-tinted biological liquid through the pores of his skin. On my side, by engaging with the practice of intra-acting with the pallet, the “Inside/Outside” mode took form when some splinters entered my skin. The intra-action can then become “Inside/Outside” and have multiple forms, from a subtle splinter getting into the skin to other striking forms where multiple splinters can derive into bleeding, for example.

The mode “Still (in Movement)” suggests a different kind of intra-action, which requires a deep sense of awareness and listening. The practice of ‘Deep Listening’ developed by artist and composer Pauline Oliveros, serves as

illustration of how this mode can operate, as it is “intended to heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible” (Oliveros, 2005). When the practice of deep listening is expanded from its initial focus on sound towards the intra-action, the mode of “Still (in Movement)” can be activated. As an example of practice, by the end of *What Wood I Be*, I laid my upper body onto the pallet for a bit in silence. At that time, I had not decided how I was going to end the piece, so I kept it open at the expense of how the intra-actions would develop. After having moved quite a lot for fifteen minutes, allowing a space for quietness brought this mode of deep listening with the pallet. Following those calming moments, the pallet emitted a sort of vibration that seemed to say, ‘let’s drag each other out of here’, so we mutually pulled our bodies out of the performing space, ending the piece.



Figure 3. *What Wood I Be* (2023).

Performer Feli Navarro, photograph by Fenia Kotsopoulou.

Indigenous non-human agency and animism

In my performance *What Wood I Be*, and in the course of this essay, I had addressed agency deriving from the notion of intra-action by Karen Barad and

her 'agential realism'. However, I think it is important to aim at indigenous studies literature on agent ontologies as a way of broadening my idea of agency. As professor and scholar Jerry Lee Rosiek points out, "(i)n Indigenous studies scholarship, non-human agency is taken as a given and so is less frequently introduced as a general concept", so there is "more emphasis on the formation of relations with particular other-than-human agents" (Rosiek et al., 2020). Furthermore, he asserts that "(r)elations with non-human agents are approached with no sense of superiority and with a focus on establishing ethical commitments to particular agents and communities of agents" (Rosiek et al., 2020). The necessity of deepening the relationship and concreting the ethical commitments between the pallet and me becomes clear to me when bringing Rosiek's insights into the work. To continue with that line of thought, I cannot help but also mention the notion of animism. As curator and writer Anselm Franke says in the book *Posthuman Glossary*, "'(a)nimism' designates a cosmos in which theoretically everything is alive and communicating" (Franke, 2018, p.39). Although, traditionally, for Western epistemology, "the term carried the allegation that so-called primitive cultures were incapable of assessing the material world", more recently the "new understandings of animism are not based on the fundament of identity and being, but rather on becomings" (Franke, 2018, p. 40). When considering the emergence of agency of a non-human body through intra-acting with another performer, an animist approach could prompt those becomings and the aliveness of all human and non-human bodies. To tie back with the initial concerns about subjectivity, Franke affirms that "(a) politicized discourse on animism hence may ask not about the subjectivity of perception, but about the subjectivity of the so-called object" (Franke, 2018, p. 40). For that reason, I consider that, for this piece to grow in significance and depth in its intra-active motifs, it would be imperative to investigate an animist approach in regards to the non-human body.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have examined the possibilities and impossibilities of intra-acting with a wooden pallet as a performer, taking as an example the experience of creating, performing, and reflecting about my piece *What Wood I Be*. In the first section I have posed the main two problems I have encountered in my intra-actions with the pallet. The second section of this essay is vital to understand why the subjectivity of a non-human body is important for me as an artist and how that constitutes ethical and political concerns. In the third section I have proposed three different modes of intra-acting with non-human bodies in performance, taking examples from theorists and performance artists. Those modes have been called “Up and Down”, “Inside/Outside” and “Still (in Movement)” and they establish an intra-active modus operandi for future performances. In the fourth section I take into account other possible ways of thinking about agency, drawing from Indigenous studies literature and animism. My intention is to keep investigating towards future iterations of *What Wood I Be*, in which the pallet and me can explore the three modes of intra-action, our relationship –from Indigenous studies lenses– and how animism can expand our notion of agency. I have just asked the pallet and they seemed to say, “hey human, that sounds like a cool plan!” so we will definitely follow that route!

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