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Adventura Botanica: Dance as a Medium for Ecological Care

Abstract: This curatorial essay describes Odd Johan Fritzøe's multimodal dance work *Adventura Botanica*, performed by Elisabeth Christine Holth at the 2023 *Environmental Emergencies Across Media* conference in Kalmar, Sweden. Using dance, sculpture, movement-activated lighting design, and improvisation-based music by the SPUNK group, this work mediates ecological themes in complex and yet approachable and even sometimes humorous ways. Though initially inspired by Darwin's interest in multispecies pollination, *Adventura Botanica* offers numerous imaginative entry points for the audience. The process of preparing the space and the sculpture, the performance itself, and the energetic, curious responses of the audience created a nexus of embodied engagement with the conference's theme. This chapter describes both the production's overlapping intermedial layers and the phenomenon of critical vulnerability in reception, drawing on Lars Elleström's intermedial theory and recent posthumanist approaches including Christine Daigle's. A human body enacting nonhuman life processes does not necessarily come across as glib anthropocentrism but rather opens up a space for imagining other bodies and vulnerabilities on a threatened planet.

Keywords: dance, intermediality, curatorial practice, environmental art.

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Invitation to the Dance

The audience enters a large, darkened art studio, using flashlights to find seats in closely arranged rows. The space is hushed, except for a sliding drone from speakers coordinated with a puzzle-like, three-metre-high sculpture. One speaker is dedicated to each instrument: voice, cello, flute/trumpet, and Waldhorn. Soon the drone sounds almost like slowed-down human speech, or perhaps the buzz of an enormous

bumblebee, with tongued "*d d d d d*" syllables repeating in the mix. One lobe of the sculpture begins to glow.

A human dancer, lying sidelong on the floor, raises an arm that seems to respond to the buzzing, humming sounds, with the addition of flute and cello. Wearing minimalist white to match the sculpture, she slowly gains energy and rises to her feet. Her dance is sometimes fluid, sometimes angular, as she touches the sculpture, backs away from it, and approaches it again, her movements following its partly plant-like, partly animal-like shape. At times she seems to be getting to know the shape of her own body, too, as if it were new to her. Twisting from a still point in the lower torso, she follows the improvisational cello line, hesitating, extending, her limbs seeming at times to be not entirely in her control.

The dancer moves in and out of the light cast by her sculptural partner, unconcerned with being in the "spotlight." At times the speakers or the sculpture's appendages light up in response to the dancer's movements, as she whirls across the floor with hands and feet. The tempo of the lighting design matches that of her body. At one point in the dance, she pauses next to one of the extended pieces of the sculpture, which drops a soft, white bulb into her hands. She carefully places it back so that it dangles, magnetically attached. It falls; she tries again, finally backing up and looking somewhat baffled at the object (or the offspring of the sculpture?) that she holds. The Waldhorn squeaks to comic effect as she rubs the seed-like shape against her body, which seems to receive jolts of energy in return.

Later, with several bulbs in front of her on the floor, the dancer contemplates them as the music veers into a rhythmic, singing sort of ceremony. The dancer folds her body into its own seed-like shape, as if testing the possibility of likeness. Then she stands, opening up and stretching with new confidence in her creaturely form. Eventually the bulb takes on a greenish glow, matching that of its sculptural source. The dancer cradles it in a push-pull dynamic between herself and the sculpture.

The tempo of the dance picks up, the dancer moving with a sense of urgency, repeating movements of gathering and releasing. Soon her body begins to struggle and weaken. She grasps the bulb again, holding it in her arms as she inches her body toward the sculpture, letting it go as she worms through an opening underneath it. The music writhes and whines. The dancer finds and lets another bulb go, picks it up again and rolls it toward the sculpture, stands and tries to regain her own ease of motion, mimicking a cradling movement as if in a memory. Finally she slides into a resting place against the sculpture, eyes closed, with the bulb circled in her arm.

The dance is Odd Johan Fritzøe's multimodal work *Adventura Botanica*, performed by Elisabeth Christine Holth at the 2023 *Environmental Emergencies Across Media* conference in Kalmar, Sweden. Inspired by Darwin's discoveries of multispecies interactions, Fritzøe's work seeks to make visible the "invisible laws of nature." According to performance notes,

> almost 150 years ago, Charles Darwin surmised the existence of an insect with a proboscis long enough to pollinate the amazing Madagascar star orchid – even

> though none had seen such a creature. Thirty years after Darwin's such an insect was finally discovered: the hawk moth, or Xanthopam morganii praedicta, part whose name was given in honour of Darwins's prediction of its existence (Fritzøe 2014).

If approached literally, the lobed sculpture plays the part of the orchid and the dancer that of the hawk moth. Dancer Elisabeth Holth has described the performance in a more open-ended way: "Maybe it is crying out the emotions of nature and the species? Do the movements portray a journey of feeling safe? Exploratory? Afraid? The sense of survival?" (Holth 2024). In her performance, Holth embodied all of these affects, in oscillation between fragility and energy, curiosity and security, fear and fortitude. Because audience members were not given explicit Darwinian cues beforehand, they responded with a wide range of interpretations as well, from "the life cycle of an insect" to "human and nonhuman entanglement." Overall, the response was a sympathetic leaning toward care for the unfolding flora-fauna interplay and a sense of vulnerability in any ecosystem it might portray.

Photo: Heidi Hart

Dance as Illustration, Communication, and Care

Artistic interventions have become commonplace in the face of human-caused climate emergency. From Extinction Rebellion's dramatic red costumes to giant puppets raising awareness of threatened ecosystems, and from complex video art to immersive installations, concern with planetary stresses has led to innumerable efforts to communicate through the senses rather than through data points – or as efforts to "translate" or transmediate scientific information. Dance, as a directly embodied art form, offers a unique way to bring climate awareness to the public while in some cases fostering criticality as well. For example, a 2022 *Midnattsolsdrøm* (*Midnight Sun's Dream*) production brought a new interpretation of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* ballet to the rooftop of the Oslo Opera House, with Titania and Oberon costumed as melting glaciers; glitchy sound design interrupted what might otherwise have been a rhapsodic experience of fluid, ice-blue bodies catching the late-night sun. The sound of Shakespeare in a cracked, sputtering male voice created a sense of human art as fragile and contingent. Overall, the performance created an oscillating perception of beauty and its brittleness, especially in vulnerable in northern ecosystems subject to rapid warming (Hart 2025).

Some climate-related dance productions set out to illustrate explicit points about extinction, ice melt, or concepts of environmental crisis. Jody Sperling's 2014 *Ice Floe* and 2015 *Ice Cycle* grew out of her work with a scientific expedition to the Arctic, with footage of her own dancing on ice floes combines with moving fabric and projections that portray the melting ice both metaphorically and literally. Karole Armitage's 2015 *On the Nature of Things* brought several dance troupes of various ages into the Hall of Ocean Life at New York's American Museum of Natural History, moving from a single dancer to an invasion of orange leotards signifying disruption of the natural order, all of this playing out under the life-size blue whale model suspended from the ceiling. Biologist and climate writer Paul Erlich narrated the performance with text from his essay "On the Culture Gap," which argues that misunderstandings about climate change require deep cultural and policy shifts. This effort to "physically illustrate" complex ideas (still in need of being read aloud) shows the difficulty of linking dance with science, or as choreographer Donna Sternberg has put it, the challenge of getting audiences to "see" the science in the dance (Petersen 2017).

Communication through narrative is another way for dance to convey a sense of ecological crisis. This does not have to be a plot-driven work, as in traditional ballet, but can offer a general storyline as *Adventura Botanica* does, with a creature's life cycle as an arc for the audience to follow. In another example, Mayfield Brooks' Covid-era *Whale Fall* takes as its outline the slow decomposition of a whale's body, explored in different locations, from a darkened gallery to the hull of a 19th-century cargo ship at New York's South Street Seaport. The meditative pacing of the decomposition narrative (with the dancers' bodies making

smaller and smaller movements, as the musical score grows more spare and ephemeral) opens up other points of reflection, from slave ships and Black grief to human and nonhuman losses in the face of climate crisis. As Brooks explains it, "I see connections with the way the whale dances and the way the body can move through water with the spine ... What is there to reclaim within this heaviness?" (Kourlas 2024).

Finding sympathetic connections between species and what can be reclaimed from a world becoming less recognizable by the year – these are elements of dance that move from "representative" to "performative" practice, in Karen Barad's sense. Barad argues that "[t]he world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies" (817). This is not just a phenomenology of what humans can observe in the world but describes "mattering" as a process of related agencies, in which bodies are always changing in response to each other. This sounds very much like dance, especially those forms of dance like Holth's or Brooks' that touch, test, explore, and react to their surroundings, and that show willingness to break down in the process. A similar approach, from Butoh dance practitioner SU-EN, is to think of how one small mosquito bite affects one's body, just as even minor disturbances can shape or break an ecosystem (Candelario 2023). Outdoor dance exercises (not meant as performances) can help humans to cultivate this sense of interrelatedness in the world – and an open-handed rather than possessive stance toward it. Writing on environmental dance as phenomenological practice, Nigel Stewart describes how a body can become an "interface" or "mediatrix," "[a]s our feet stamp, stick, screw or sink into the ground or test the edge between the grassy and watery zones – or as we whip our torsos against the wind; or as our limbs glide in response to the curve of a creek, the flight path of a bird, the striated textures of a cloud or the slithering of a red articulated lorry across the distant horizon" (Stewart 34).

Behind such efforts at responding to a fragile world in crisis is an attitude of curiosity and care. The word "care" has become ubiquitous in curatorial practices in the global North over the past decade. As it relates to the "curate" role in caretaking, the concept has informed projects on radical mothering, metabolic processes, and land-use strategies in Scandinavia. This emphasis has helped to rescue curatorial practice from its more colonialist tendencies, in terms of ego-driven or exclusionary exhibition planning (Voegelin 2023). Curating a dance performance based on multispecies interactions, I found that the "care" aspect of *Adventura Botanica* was built into its infrastructure, preparatory work, and eventual audience response. Clearing the performance space – a high-ceilinged art studio full of tables, supplies, and student artworks – required a measure of care in itself, as did darkening the large windows and carrying the sculpture, piece by piece, through the maze of a university building. The live dynamics between dancer, sculpture, sound,

and lighting design came across as instinctive and inevitable, as biologically based care, a reaching-out and response without sentimentality.

Part of curatorial practice is also working with the unexpected. Though I had planned to introduce *Adventura Botanica* with some background on its Darwinian inspirations, linking the pollinator drama to threatened species in a time of climate and biodiversity crises, time and space constraints in the hallway outside the art studio made this difficult. Once the technician opened the door to signal that the soundtrack had begun, the audience needed to be ready to file in with our flashlights. We squeezed through the doorway with our little beams, like a swarm of lightning bugs entering an unfamiliar ecosystem. But this is only one possible simile for the experience of humans entering a more-than-human dance space in the dark. In hindsight, the lack of an interpretive gloss gave the audience more room to respond imaginatively to the performance. The dance became a medium for "care" in that it invited the audience to be curious and open to ambiguity, without the startling overhead light that sets the stage for most academic presentations.

After the performance, the audience voiced a wide variety of possible interpretations. Though most of us were humanities scholars trained to be suspicious of making metaphorical or allegorical links too easily, the vulnerability and even humor of the performance fostered an almost childlike openness in the audience. Listening to their responses ("like the life cycle of any creature," "coming out of a chrysalis," "humans in the struggle with the planet" "Pygmalion," "dancer and her double," "the miracle of any seed germinating at all," "the death of so many species"), I did not find this openness to be unproductively naïve but rather energetic and enthusiastic, finding a new source of vitality in facing ecological crisis. It was as though, in sympathetically attending to a life cycle embodied onstage, even watching its sometimes brutal encounters and ultimate collapse, the audience moved through this breakdown into many possible openings for reflection.

As curator Ida Bencke has pointed out, "care is not pretty." It can be "thorny and even violent" (Bencke 2023). *Adventura Botanica* does not frame interspecies relations with the beauty of ballet or the stylized sweeps of some modern-dance conventions. Instead it reflects developmental movement, a practice that builds on early childhood kinetics of closure and release, with therapeutic, choreographic, and even multispecies applications (some movements resemble those of a sea star opening and closing around the mouth at its core [Newmark 2008]). *Adventura Botanica* relates these core movements across species, not in a universalizing way but as a node of contact, in which audience members can feel their own arms extending or contracting, can sense exhaustion through the dancer's body in front of them, and can imagine not just the stresses of an ordinary death at the end of one creature's life but a larger-scale, collective breakdown as well.

Dance as Intermedial Transformation

Performed during a conference with the theme of mediating environmental emergency, *Adventura Botanica* may have appeared less filtered and more *immediate* than the news reports, novels, films, and art exhibitions discussed in academic panels. Here was a body in front of the audience, expressing a creature's vitality through gesture. But just as the "immediacy" or "*Unmittelbarkeit*" idealized in Romantic art was always mediated in some way (the staging of a ballet, the musical setting of lyric poetry, the framing and displaying of a painting), live dance performance is a complex act of mediation as well. *Adventura Botanica's* combination of movement, visual art, music, and lighting design created a multimodal experience with many possible semiotic entry points.

Because much of multimodal theory focuses on socially conditioned communicative acts, rather than artistic expression *per se*, bridging this with an intermedial approach is helpful in understanding how various forms of sensory input combine to create aesthetic works (Jensen and Schirrmacher 2023). Beginning with an acknowledgment that "all media are mixed media" (Mitchell 2005), intermedial theory, when applied to artworks, teases apart *material*, *sensory*, *spatiotemporal*, and *semiotic* strands to understand their dynamic effects and meaning-making potentials (Elleström 2021). This approach allows for analysis of artworks and other media products with close-reading specificity but also "a certain measure of openness and creativity" (Bruhn and Salmose 47). In the case of *Adventura Botanica*, the sculpture's material presence concentrates the space and the audience's attention around it. The sensorial experience of recorded sound and shifting lights in a dark room both mirrors and amplifies the dancer's movements, which relate to the sculpture in a way that makes it seem as alive as she is, or she as materially malleable as its puzzle-like structure. Meanwhile, time seems to slow down in the fictional space created by these moving elements; though a creature's life is compressed into less than an hour, it seems to breathe and stretch and fall at its own contemplative tempo. At the semiotic level, "reading" the performance as a moth's life cycle depends on how much information the audience has received beforehand. As we discovered in the conference performance, the lack of an explicit interpretive framework allowed audience members to bring their own ideas about the dancer-sculpture dynamic into dialogic play with the performance itself, adding a new layer of mediation.

As a transmediation of scientific ideas, dance is more than an illustration of data, as often as dance performances are promoted that way – and as important as it is not to soften or relativize scientific fact in light of climate crisis, as Andeas Malm has argued. In their intermedial approach to ecocriticism, Jørgen Bruhn and Niklas Salmose have noted that these data are already conveyed after their own "media transformation" in the processes of analysis,

textual communication, peer review, and conference presentations, as well as via graphs and charts and maps, before public dissemination through online news, television, radio, blogs, podcasts, educational materials, and social media (8). Art and literature are certainly part of this dissemination process, although their intermedial frameworks differ. To mediate knowledge about a hawk moth's life cycle – gathered from the time of Darwin's note-taking to today's digital composites of field data – into a semi-abstract multimodal dance performance is to subsume concepts into movements, light, sound, and visual art. If made explicit at the semiotic level, these concepts, of moth-flower entanglement, the fragility of life, and the implication of every life endangered amid climate disruption, become less scientifically precise but more phenomenologically present. Even if not explained to the audience beforehand, the biological fragility of the dancer's role is clear throughout the performance.

In the context of a conference on ecological emergency as threaded through various screens, stages, galleries, texts, images, and sounds, a live performance brought to life the paradox of "now-ness" in much environmental communication. Though Elisabeth Holth's dancing appeared vulnerable and sometimes painfully present, it had been carefully choreographed, rehearsed, and coordinated with music recorded after lengthy improvisation by the four musicians in the SPUNK quartet. Likewise, an image of a starving polar bear or an advertisement for electric cars does not come out of nowhere but results from framing, editing, perhaps including music with its own affective force, and choosing what to include and what to leave out. The main difference between screen or textual mediation and live performance is the unpredictability of the body and of audience response. In this sense, dance as a medium is more open and "relational" than more fixed forms. As Samuel Weber has noted, "A *medium* ... is not a *realm*, because its distinctively spatial quality – its status 'in between' – indicates that it can never be construed as self-contained or self-regulating. Rather, it is relational and situational, depending decisively on alien or extraneous instances that, in the case of theater, are generally identified with the spectators or audiences" (Weber 43). On a broader level, in contemporary dancer and teacher Danielle Goldman's terms, dance can work as a "feedback loop between the dancers and the society in which they operate ... as dancers push against social boundaries, society shifts, even if minutely, in response" (Godwin 64). Extending this idea to multispecies relations, if only imaginatively, makes *Adventura Botanica* a compelling case study in ecological media.

Embodying Nonhuman Life

From a posthumanist perspective (a complex field of inquiry beyond this essay's scope, except to emphasize a de-centering of humanity's roles on Earth), a dance performance that imagines interaction between two nonhuman species might seem like a basic step in the right direction, if one that remains anthropocentric in the fact of who is dancing. This practice is actually an old one, from Indigenous ceremonies that feature hybrid human-animal dancers to the elegant impossibilities of *Swan Lake*. More recently, an improvised dance performance in an art gallery – also at Linnaeus University, as part of the 2019 *Multispecies Storytelling* conference – involved humans playing the roles of plants, with an intentionally unclear beginning and ending to the performance, so that "plants" and "audience" intermingled in curious, awkward, and vulnerable moments. In the case of *Adventura Botanica*, a clearer gloss on dancer as "hawk moth" and sculpture as "orchid" might have made the experience more pedagogical and less imaginatively freeing. As it happened, the dancer could be embodying any living creature, allowing for identification on the one hand and mystification on the other. This oscillating ambiguity encouraged audience members to lean forward into the performance, wanting to know more.

In their 2014 book on "animal acts" in theatre, Una Chaudhuri and Holly Hughes have expressed how embodied experience is needed to come closer to understanding other species. "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" (Chaudhuri and Hughes 2014). Elisabeth Holth's performance, with its "what are these limbs?" and "what happens if I rub this bulb against me?" gestures, revealed a creature in search of their own awareness and at the same time a human body stretching itself into another body, testing other senses, other instincts, other sensitivities to gravity, sound, touch, and light.

"The world we inhabit is not," as David Abrams puts it, "a determinable set of objective processes. It is our larger flesh, a densely intertwined and improvisational tissue of experience" (Abrams 143). Though *Adventura Botanica* features a human dancer inhabiting nonhuman form, her reaching, inching, lifting, and sinking allow those watching and listening to sense this larger entwinement in a sympathetically kinetic way as well. As I stood near the doorway watching the performance, I noticed a collective leaning and loosening in the bodies of the seated participants – as I started to see them, more than merely "audience." In her work with dance and animal studies (as paraphrased by Adam Godwin), Carrie Rohman has been careful to note that a dance in the *Adventura Botanica* mode is not "about imitating animals but about invoking an 'animality' that exists within the dancer themselves"; she also notes that "the traditional ballet pirouette and the gait of a prowling leopard aren't so distinct as

they may appear" (Godwin 55). Tapping into evolutionary and developmental movement, a dancer can call up embodied tendencies in others, too.

Whether seen as a plant form or not, even the puzzle-like sculpture in the dance performance embodies nonhuman presence. As Elisabeth Holth describes it, "Each shape has its own depth and life" as well as the sound of human voice, flute, cello, or Waldhorn shaping the space acoustically (Holth 2024). In the sense of Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" (2010), these shapes evoke the material vitality of stone, iron, oil, or electricity, even without the additional, metaphorical mediation of "plant" or more specifically "orchid." The ambiguity of the sculpture's form – plant-like but also with the possibility of creaturely limbs, or perhaps a more robotic figure, slightly larger than the size of a tall human – gives it imaginative heft that a more literal shape would lack. The play of light and sound emanating from the shapes themselves makes their vitality palpable. When, at the end of the performance, the dancer sinks into repose or death against the sculpture, it seems to press back with, if not exactly warmth, an answering solidity.

Coda: Urgency in Vulnerability

Within the frame of a conference on environmental emergency, the dance performance *Adventura Botanica* created a material and sensory world with numerous interpretive possibilities. Because the audience did not receive explicit instruction on how to "read" the human-sculpture interaction, they responded with enthusiastic curiosity and care toward the interspecies drama unfolding in the room. The paradox of "strong" and "fragile" movements (Holth 2024) reflected not only individual life forms but also the resilience and endangerment of the planet as a living web.

Though "vulnerability" has been valorized in human therapeutic contexts in the past several years (in terms of owning and sharing one's woundedness), it usually has negative connotations for ecologists (Daigle 105). If a species is vulnerable, it faces local extirpation or global extinction. Showing physical vulnerability in the dancer's body, Holth's performance tapped into conference participants' concern for environmental crisis and the messaging around it. At the same time, oscillation between strength in movement and more "yielding" moments (Holth 2024) revealed what Christine Daigle has called "vulner-ability," or "an intensity that emerges out of the dynamic flux of forces and tensions in which it exists" (117). The audience's own energetic conversation after the performance showed that rather than feeling a sense of ecological doom, they found sympathetic energy in shared performance space and meaning in response and interpretation. The "intensity" of the experience matched the thematic urgency of the conference, especially in contributions from Danish performance artist Madame Nielsen and an interventionist visit from the Rebel Mamas,

part of Greta Thunberg's climate movement in Sweden. Mediated though sound, lighting design, and visual art, the dance performance mirrored the complexity of any mindful effort to respond to ecological crisis – and at the same time the potential to find energy and even joy in the process.

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