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Reclaiming the Metamorphic Imagination: Ecosomatic Practice and the Poetics of Myth in the Age of Ecological Disaster

Introduction

More than half a century after ground-breaking director Peter Brook delivered the four lectures then published as *The Empty Space*, we could ask again: what is the space of theatre? Is this space still empty? Where is this space?¹ Brook addressed a humanity still troubled by the atrocities of the two World Wars. Through his poetical history of mankind, he intimately approached the dilemmas of being human. Are we today still capable of addressing the crossroads of existence around a poetic and political question? How can we approach the legacy of Brook's story-worlding performance practices in the shadows of anthropogenic ecological disasters?

This article performs a poetic dialogue in which the authors – a dancer and a dramatist – discuss the evolving relationship between their pedagogical practices as the seed for developing a methodology for performer training that invites bodies to enter the issue of ecological disasters. Our aim is to expose the wounds of separation between nature and civilization and the inability to grieve for ecological losses that pervades contemporary society. We want to draw attention to how theatre can confront the tragedy of our destructive cultural heritage by nurturing a bodily connection with the nonhuman and matter and by reclaiming our mythic imagination. The space we are interrogating to understand how to become ecosomatic artists lies outside of theatres: it is where the river passes, where the dunes begin, where the bark pulverises. It is a theatre that is millions of years old, in motion from its origins, expanding and rotating, cosmically attuned, physically not yet revealed to human cognition. We have entered the horizon of a thought that reveals how we are not ecological and how scandalous the separation from the rest

¹ P. Brook, *The Empty Space. A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*, New York, Scribner, 1996.

of nature is. Separation ultimately means the refusal to feel the ecological disaster as impending, as the accident that is about to overwhelm us. It is from the point of view of this refusal that the question of drama and myth and the power of words burst onto the scene.

The article is based on the authors' shared experience of '*La Selva: International Ecosomatic and Regenerative Arts Residency*' held between 5-8 October 2023 in Ostia and the Natural Reserve of the Roman Coast (Rome, Central Italy) with the participation of forty eco-oriented artists, scholars, and educators from all over the world². *La Selva* aimed to curate a re-discovering of the deep embodied knowledge of ecological connection within the human experience, as a necessary process of care and cultural resistance. It was a pathway for seeking an exchange between ways of feeling the ecological crisis. With this article we respond to the pedagogical-performative investigations that tried to emerge during the residency and engage with the reflections and interventions that followed. The text is also informed by our earlier collaboration at *Humanitas Mundi Teatro*, a nascent ensemble of performance research and cooperation based in Rome, which started in 2021 and led to co-creating the performance lecture *Ecosomatic Persephone*³. While the ideas on the poetics of myth discussed in this article were central in this earlier exploration – both conceptually and practically, they were not proposed directly to the participants of the *La Selva* residency. Combining in practice our different approaches to performance training would have needed a longer preparation and a more refined coordination on how to integrate the movement of words in a residency focused on body movement. Although we are aware that, if integrated in the training practice, the mythological-dramaturgical dimension would have had a different force-activating quality in writing this text, the experience of the residency was a catalyst for furthering our conversations on the topic.

The article is positioned within the growing field of ecosomatic arts with a particular focus on practices inspired by conscious and improvisational dance training, site-responsive performance and activism. These practices combine and integrate the experience of dance and performance with principles and modes of inquiry of somatic disciplines such as Body-Mind Centering, Authentic Movement, Laban

² The residency was coordinated and facilitated by Raffaele Rufo and Thomas Kampe in collaboration with Intercultural Roots (UK), Teatro del Lido di Ostia (Rome), the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica (Rome) and other local cultural, educational and ecological organisations. As artistic director of Teatro del Lido, Flavia Gallo collaborated in the creative development of the residency and participated in some of its activities. For more details, see <https://www.raffaele-rufo.com/ecosomatics/2023-la-selva-human-nature-connect-residency-rome> (last access: 18 October 2024).

³ Presented at the 9th Conference of the International Platform for Performer Training (IPPT) - Chiuse (Italy), 12-15 January 2023.

Movement Analysis and the Feldenkrais Method⁴. Ecosomatics emerges from the meeting of two relational paradigms. Somatic as a quality of experience and somatics as a field are words derived from the Greek *soma*. While the body is what we observe from the outside, the *soma* characterises the living body as an integrated physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual phenomenon observed “from the first-person viewpoint of [one’s] own proprioceptive senses”⁵. Ecology, a term derived from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning household, habitat, or dwelling place, is the study of how organisms interact with one another and with their environments⁶. Ecosomatic practices engage the actual, in-the-flesh sensory experience of dancers, choreographers, theatre and performance artists and other embodiment artists in their entanglement with plants, minerals, water, soil, atmospheric phenomena and biological processes and also with cultural and political forces.

1. Is the forest dead?

RAFFAELE RUFO: We live in the age of ecological disasters. When looking at the conditions of the land where we live and where our performance and pedagogical practice is based, the coastal area of Rome, one of the greenest urban areas in Europe, we are faced with a painful scenery of death. A great fire on 4 July 2000 burnt nearly three hundred hectares of forest and, in less than ten years, more than fifty-thousand pine trees have been killed by an insect imported from North America. One is tempted to embrace the discourse of ecological disaster as a call to action. However, apocalyptic thinking is dangerous because it reinforces the paradigm of nature as something separate from us. If we are part of nature, then ecological losses are also human losses, and our wounds are embedded in the wounds we have caused⁷. When last year I was scouting the Ostia territory of the Natural Reserve of the Roman Coast in search of inspiring sites for running *La Selva* residency, I was

⁴ For three recent and comprehensive collections of works in the field of ecosomatic arts, cfr. M. Bardet, J. Clavel and I. Ginot (edited by), *Ecosomatiques: Penser l'écologie depuis le geste*, Montpellier, Deuxième Époque, 2019, pp. 9-19; T. Kampe, J. McHugh and K. Munker, *Embodying eco-consciousness: Somatics, aesthetic practices and social action*, in «Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices», XIII, 2021, nn. 1-2 (special issue on eco-consciousness), pp. 3-8; S. Fraleigh S.R. Riley (edited by), *Geographies of us: Ecosomatic essays and practice pages*, London, Routledge, 2024.

⁵ T. Hanna, *What is somatics? (Part I)*, in «Somatics: Magazine-Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences», V, 1986, n. 4, p. 4.

⁶ S. Bottoms, A. Dranks, P. Kramer, *Editorial: On ecology*, in «Performance Research», XVII, 2012, n. 4, pp. 1-4.

⁷ For a discussion of the transformative potential of connecting our fear of ecological crises with the somatic practice-knowledge of embodied experience, cfr. R. Rufo, *Somatic Arts and Liveable Futures: Embodying Ecological Connections*, in «Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities», IV, 2024, n. 1.



Fig. 1. *La Selva* residency, Forest of Castel Fusano, “Field of Fire and Regeneration”. Photo by Stefania Milazzo.

struck by a particular place in the Forest of Castel Fusano where the traces of the great fire of 2000 are still very tangible (Figure 1).

I was faced with a spontaneous scenography of the tragedy and felt immersed in a dynamic space between life and death: where the pine trees lived (planted by humans as monoculture for commercial purposes), now the plants of the Mediterranean scrub (the *macchia*) are thriving again. Our conversations and creative collaborations throughout the last three years have led us to posit the need for reconfiguring our relationship with death and regaining the ability to grieve individually and collectively for ecological losses as a key pathway for seeding reciprocity with the rest of nature⁸. How does this challenge impact the vantage point of your dramaturgical practice?

FLAVIA GALLO: The forest is dying. It is already dead and being reborn. All this at the same time. As a dramatist, I have developed a deep interest in the ways humans can be witnesses or participants in these cyclical evolutions that could be a source

⁸ For a discussion of the perceptual roots of ecological crises and the role of ecosomatic art practices as a vehicle for embodying personal and cultural processes of grieving and regeneration, see R. Rufo, *Ecosomatic Seeds of Reciprocity: The Perceptual Roots of Ecological Crises*, public lecture presented at the Italian Cultural Institute of Bucharest as part of the ROOTS dance residency, 26 March 2024.

of deep mourning, enthusiastic celebration, and lively contemplation. The inability of grieving collectively for the wounds of the world has spread so powerfully in our *psyche* (read Greek: soul) that we are right in it: think of the coffins of the pandemic, the war-corpses on the borders of Europe, and the Mediterranean *Mare Nostrum* that has become a grave. This and other ecological tragedies tell us of a grieving that we are no longer even able to place temporally in our everyday life. How exactly we humans experience this state of separation from the rest of nature today is difficult to say: poets help us find the right word to speak of this wound. Ancient Latin poets used to speak of the *selva* as a place of continuous material and immaterial fabric, the habitat of the *genius loci*, the unified cosmos of a common destiny plot shared by humanity with water, rocks, trees, and divinities. Embracing death and becoming intimate with it was a central issue in ancient myth. Our first conversations and embodied encounters before *La Selva* residency were around the myth of Persephone, the female archetype, queen of the underworld: she who, in the transition from the childlike state of Cora to that of Persephone's adulthood, makes us witness the possibility of crossing a threshold that we are no longer even able to trace. We worked in the studio by bringing the materials collected in the dying pine forest, sharing ecosomatic improvisational movement practices, and attending to the sensory language that can enable us to see life-death-life as a fact of love, just like Cora who, out of love, becomes Persephone. I want to share an example of how this research can take us into the forgotten fabrics of the *selva* as in a process of re-initiation:

Remember the land
 That land
 Where the story of Cora
 becoming Persephone
 Always happens?
 The story of the maiden
 who becomes
 the ruler of the Underworld

Do you know
 What lies beneath your feet?
 The earth...
 And what is beneath the earth?
 The thousand-year-old rock
 And what is beneath the rock?
 Underneath is water
 And you know what's under the water
 Yes
 The fire
 And underneath the ancient fire

Just underneath
is God⁹.

As discussed by Theresa May in her account of how earth matters on stage, we tried to retell the story of Persephone by calling non-human and inanimate elements of the world around us as “witnesses” and trying to engage them in a true artistic collaboration by forging an “alliance”¹⁰. To discover that there is a God lying under the fire, at the end of a series of unveilings, we really had to literally trace with our bare hands the permeable and fusible boundaries of matter. It was therefore a question of interrogating what is deeply involved even if it only appears to us as an environmental backdrop, of bringing to the foreground of the imagination that which has burning and legitimate interests in existing even if it has never been questioned¹¹. Cora is immersed in sacred awe (θαμβήσας) as she contemplates a narcissus and it is only when she reaches out to pick it up that a chasm opens up from the base of the flower. From that chasm emerges the king of the dead, Hades, who takes her away into the underworld to marry her against her will. I am inspired by Una Chaudhuri’s discussion of how difficult it is to free oneself from the humanistic ideology that sees dramatic conflict playing out only between and about humans¹². Ecosomatics offers dramaturgy an opportunity to reclaim its original extension as a coexisting totality, as a set of human and nonhuman, living and not-living dynamic entities moving through time and space with equal narrative dignity.

2. What is *La Selva*?

FLAVIA GALLO: The topics of death and grieving in their eco-biographical dimension have a mystical and utopian vastness and at the same time concern concrete attention in the minimal unity of presence. It poses a spherical, ultimate, integral question to being in the world. How have you worked, then, to make this question available to the experience of a group, of a place, of an entire community during the *La Selva* project? How have you worked to call others into this dimension of learning? I want to ask you, ultimately, what is *La Selva* and what is its radical dynamism?

RAFFAELE RUFO: I set out to organise *La Selva* as a pedagogical participatory process driven by a desire to develop new ways of collaborating and making commu-

⁹ R. Rufo and F. Gallo, *Ecosomatic Persephone*, performance lecture, 2023.

¹⁰ T.J. May, *Earth Matters on Stage, Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, London, Routledge, 2021, esp. pp. 5-7.

¹¹ Cfr. J. Sermon, *Teatro e ecologia: mudança de escalas ou de paradigma*, in «Móin-Móin – Revista de Estudos sobre Teatro de Formas Animadas», II, 2021, n. 25, pp. 24-49.

¹² U. Chaudhuri, *There Must Be a Lot of Fish in that Lake: Toward an Ecological Theater*, in «Theater», XXV, 1994, n. 1, pp. 23-31.

nity with other ecosomatic artists by focusing on the key role of place, ecological drama, and cultural roots while at the same time responding to the international drive of this young and growing field. *La Selva* was a step in a long-term journey of connecting with body and roots by inviting strangers to visit a land that I consider to be part of my Italic-Greek-Latin cultural heritage. The residency unfolded as the crossroads between two tensions not easily reconcilable in an international project. On the one hand there is the macro tension of wanting to connect with community and land by engaging with the unique aspects of the local ecosystem to integrate them in a working methodology of embodied curation and facilitation that stretches the boundaries of traditional theatre and performance practices. On the other hand, there is the micro tension of going to the roots of sensing by engaging with a slow process of attunement with the world and witnessing a shift of perception into a heightened and expanded experience of being touched and danced by the nonhuman and by matter.

Drawing a parallel with Harney and Moten's decolonial notion of "hapticality", and extending it to encompass the nonhuman and matter, the question of how *La Selva* was brought into the world becomes an opportunity to explore how touch and movement offer themselves as a *technē* for feeling the skin of death in a process of reciprocal embedding¹³. Harney and Moten describe the experience of black slaves being "thrown together touching each other" to be shipped to the New World and how this triggered an alternative mode of coexistence (i.e., hapticality) that is "immediately social" and that exceeds "all things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home"¹⁴. The in-the-flesh collective encounter of the *La Selva* participants with the outpouring signs of the passages between death and life, both in the Forest of Castel Fusano and in the peripheral urban context of Ostia, was imagined and proposed to them as a way of destabilising the psychic and physical separation with the rest of nature and providing a taste of what an ecological mode of coexistence could feel like.

Was the experiment successful? We witnessed the participants' desire for slower time, more moments of listening and not doing and for more intimacy with the place as a precondition for allowing things to happen. We also witnessed the difficult, but not impossible task of creating the conditions for inviting strangers to encounter the unique eco-cultural history of the land and of learning from the freshness of their view. This translocal challenge and its transformative potential can be appreciated in the words of a local participant, written just after the residency: "You live for thirty-two years in a place, then you learn to dance with it".

¹³ S. Harvey and F. Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Studies*, Brooklyn, NY, Minor Compositions, 2013, esp. chap 6.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 98.

3. Why does ecosomatics need ancient myth?

RAFFAELE RUFO: The word *selva* entered our conversation after attending together Sista Bramini's theatre pièce "Miti d'Acqua" at Teatro Basilica in Roma¹⁵. In this work Bramini tells stories drawn from the *Metamorphoses*, an epic-mythological poem written in Latin by Ovid (43 a.C. - 17/18 d.C.). *La Selva* is not only the *topos* of the experience of a group of international artists joining an ecosomatic residency in Rome, it is also an important category of Ovid's environmental imagination¹⁶. In the *Metamorphoses* Ovid rewrote over 250 myths from the perspective of the past and ongoing meetings between Greek and Latin cultures. For Ovid those myths were ancient and needed to be rewritten so that they could have a contemporary value. Why, from a poetic point of view, does the ecosomatic rediscovery of the resemblance and commonality with the nonhuman and with matter relate to ancient myth? How can ancient myth help us get to the bottom of this quest? What is the mythical core that can be associated with this question?

FLAVIA GALLO: Although the question of the relation between ecosomatics and the poetics of myth was not explored directly with the participants of *La Selva*, the experience of the residency nurtured my reflections and our conversations on how returning to our mythic cultural heritage can help us regain the ability to grieve for ecological losses. Myth is a metamorphic and ancient source: it is part of that imaginal reserve of the world that can help us bring the forces of the encounter between human and nonhuman outside the formal boundaries of ecosomatic practice and within a specific language that anticipates it in time. Myth is a syllabic, phonetic, semiotic and sensory "ecosystem" often embedded in the experience of the speaker who recounted it verbally and from memory. What the exact meaning of the mythical narrative was for the world that spawned it, no one can say with any precision. Seen from here, though, those ancient men and women seem to have taken it as a belief and at the same time a practical philosophy of presence: as an indication of the non-dualistic quality of human action. Myth reveals to us different versions of awe before all things, visible and invisible, material and immaterial, permanent and immanent. It tells us of a paradigmatic capacity of human beings to "become like" things. According to Aristotle, "becoming like" is the most intense capacity that humanity has ever possessed¹⁷. Myth is deeply animated by this leitmotif of becoming, of being literally transformed by a feeling, of the immediate change of state at

¹⁵ In 1992 Sista Bramini founded the theatre company O'Thiasos TeatroNatura (<https://teatronatura.it/>) which can be considered as a pioneering example of performative and pedagogical ecosomatic practices in Italy.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trad. A.D. Melville, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.

¹⁷ Cfr. G. Scaramuzzo, *Aristotle's homo mimeticus as an educational paradigm for human coexistence*, in «Journal of Philosophy of Education», L, 2016, n. 2.

the beginning of a thought. The mythic-poetic word speaks to us of this immense reserve of multiformity that we no longer know how to access and act upon. Becoming river, rock, tree, echo, fire, star and then human again is a dramaturgy of existence constantly staged in an ancient and pregnant place of culture, where science and poetry coexisted, where nothing could be imagined outside the contiguous and interchangeable whole formed by what is animated and what is not¹⁸. Through the metamorphic nucleus of ancient myth, ecosomatics can be engaged as an ancestral kinaesthetic crossing or an extended-deepened-intensified perceptiveness of the relationship between human and non-human. This is, ultimately, a way to embody the descent into the memory of the world to gather the somatic experience of myth in the movement of the body and in the movement of words.

4. How can we become sensors today?

FLAVIA GALLO: The “Homo Mythicus”, if one can use this expression, the one who can transform himself or herself in the present moment into water, into rocks, into plants as in mythical stories, is disappearing. Does ecosomatics come after myth to rekindle a conscious quality of being part of the perennial metamorphosis of things? The ancient world was filled with ritual practices that served, through a complex and layered initiatory preparation, to gain access to the sacred, by definition separate, beyond a precise threshold. The theme of approaching and preparing for the ritual (for the profound and scandalous touch) is a key to enter the space of the drama where sacrifice takes place¹⁹. How do I approach the sacred space, the space of ritual? What images must I encounter and embody so that a precise feeling of something to yearn for can arise, a feeling that makes me want to feel more, that awakens my desire? What do I offer sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste so that the sixth sense can act synesthetically with the others?

RAFFAELE RUFO: As a way of awakening the metamorphic in the human and as a source of regeneration of the quality of participation, I want to draw on the stories on “becoming sensor” articulated by Natasha Myers. Myers, a critical plant scholar and cultural anthropologist with a background in biology and dance, describes her arts-based research project on plant sensing as a kinaesthetic entanglement with Toronto’s High Park. She writes about an experience of “experimenting with ways to tune into the sentience of the land and participate actively in animating its relations” and of “developing the skills that we would need in order to render ourselves

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ I have discussed the importance of bringing into play the integrity and actuality of one’s world for a pedagogical-performative process in F. Gallo, *Il senso spirituale dell’espressione umana. Una proposta pedagogica contro la disumanizzazione della parola*, in «Formazione & Insegnamento», XVII, 2019, n. 1, pp. 318-335.

available to the work of allyship”²⁰. To become sensors we need to accept the frustrations of waiting and suspending judgement. Something unexpected and unintended is invited to address our conscious awareness whilst remaining outside our grasp. In the field of ecosomatics we find many different ways of approaching this work in practice. A few years ago, I had a direct experience of the improvisational performance practice of *Body Weather* (in Japanese Shinto Kisho) in which dancers are challenged to engage the embodied presence of nature in a mental and physical process of expanding their capacity to receive and respond to multiple sensory stimulations²¹. Conceived in the 1970’s by Min Tanaka, a Japanese dancer and choreographer trained in the butoh dance tradition, *Body Weather* approaches the body “as a force of nature: ever-changing, omni-centred and completely open to external stimuli”²². Whatever the specific ecosomatic approach, experiencing the embodied self as connected and continuous with an embodied nature requires exploring and affirming the value of sensoriality and sensuousness as key pathways to meet the nonhuman and matter²³.

With this perspective in mind, let’s go back to what happened when the resident artists of *La Selva* were guided into the Forest of Castel Fusano (the same referred to at the beginning of this article) to meet with burnt trees and witness the cycle of life-death-life (Figure 2).

As a facilitator, I proposed a tactile movement practice of grieving with the dead trees and with the land. I invited the participants to seek an intimate experience of lying on the fallen trunks and shaping into their dead bodies. I asked them to work on the sensation and embodied image of being touched by the trees, the air, the light and the voice of the birds both kinesthetically and affectively²⁴. The process ensued in the spontaneous offer from a participant to lead a song of collective grief inspired by the Southern Italian tradition of the “prefiche” (singing mourners accompanying the funeral processions). We were all gathered around the fallen trunks. After this, another participant offered a ritual of gratitude which involved

²⁰ M. Evans, *Becoming Sensor in the Planthropocene: An Interview with Natasha Myers*, in «Fieldsights», Visual and New Media Review, 2020.

²¹ Z. Fuller, *Seeds of an anti-hierarchic ideal: Summer training at Body Weather Farm*, in «Theatre, Dance and Performance Training», V, 2014, n. 2, pp. 197-203.

²² Ivi, p. 198.

²³ For other examples of ecosomatic performance training practices, cfr. S. Bauer, *Body and earth as one: Strengthening our connection to the natural source with ecosomatics*, in «Conscious Dancer: Movement for a Better World», Spring issue, 2008, pp. 8-9; A. Olsen, *Body and Earth: An Experiential Guide*, Hanover, University Press of New England, 2002.

²⁴ For a discussion and documentation of the project “Sensing with Trees” (2020-2022) on which this proposition was based, cfr. R. Rufo, *Sensing with Trees: Explorations in the Reciprocity of Perception*, in «Venti Journal: Air, Experience, Aesthetics», II, 2022, n. 2; Id., *Humans, Trees, and the Intimacy of Movement: An Encounter with Eco-Somatic Practice*, in «European Journal of Ecological Psychology», VIII, 2023, pp. 88-113.



Fig. 2. *La Selva*, Forest of Castel Fusano, "Shaping and Grieving Practice". Photo by Sebastian Tilsch, 2023.

the distribution of some drops of the maple syrup she had produced according to the indigenous customs of Turtle Island and brought to Rome from Canada as a gift to the land.

After the international artists left Ostia, the presence of thousands of dead pine trees, scattered across the urban territory, still standing on their feet with their grey crowns deprived of leaves, became stronger and stronger. During the months that followed *La Selva*, the municipality of Rome decided to cut down the dead trees for safety reasons. I was left to witness their felling and eradication on my own, powerless. I spent a lot of time reflecting on the kind of eco-cultural regeneration that could ensue by honouring the death of these trees in a shared ritual positioned between the performative and civic intervention. I started to imagine conducting an ecosomatic funeral for the felled trees. I began collecting what was left on the margins of the streets after the intervention of chainsaws, bulldozers, and drilling rigs: broken branches, decomposing and very fragile shields of bark perforated by insects, and fragments of the marrow shuttered at the base of the trees and once connected with the roots. These vibrant materials became an important inspiration for preparing an ecosomatic immersion with a group of local artists.

I worked with the group in a farmhouse immersed in the countryside of Ostia Antica (Rome), not far from the Forest of Castel Fusano. I placed the collected remains of the dead pines around the lying blocks of the trunk of a tree that had just been felled. I composed the scene of the funeral before the arrival of participants: the shields of bark stacked a bit away from the trunk, the fragments of marrow wood on the soil to form a circle around the stump, a bucket of water on

Fig. 3. Ecosomatic improvisation training, Ostia Antica (Rome), "Funeral of the Tree". Photo by Valentina Vitolo, 2024.



top of the stump, a big tray with small bits of charcoal near the water, and the broken branches on the other side of the trunk. I also placed a flute on the main trunk. Before inviting the participants to enter the scene one by one, I told them the story of the dying forest. After asking participants to lie on the trunk, I proposed that they engage the elements I had brought there, one at a time, to build the ritual. Soon after that I witnessed quite clearly a meeting between the internal world of the participant and the external world of the practice. The focus went on the large pieces of bark and one participant asked to be buried under them. The group responded with incredible care and intensity (Figure 3).

The funeral for the tree transformed quite spontaneously and rather quickly into a death ritual where it was hard to tell whether we humans were grieving for the death of trees or whether trees (what was left of them, their "flesh") were grieving for the human condition (on this inversion, compare Figure 3 with Figure 2). A

second threshold was reached when we all got closer to the lying participant and placed our hands on her body with that solemn attention that is reserved to the dead ones, or to the loved ones. This inspired me to mark her passage into life by playing the flute. The participants responded by starting to remove the pieces of bark from the lying body and by interacting vocally with the flute. This continued until the lying participant, freed from that weight, opened her eyes and was welcomed emphatically by the others. She then was helped to stand up. It was a powerful moment of reconnection between the human and the nonhuman.

5. How can the poetics of myth help us rediscover the resemblance with the rest of nature?

RAFFAELE RUFO: After the international residency I began a closer collaboration with Teatro del Lido di Ostia – where you are part of the team of artistic directors – with the vision of developing a civic-pedagogical trajectory for *La Selva*. We invited active citizens already involved in the cultural life of the theatre to participate in a series of outdoor ecosomatic immersions in key natural-cultural places of the territory. Seven months after the residency, we returned with a small group to the Forest of Castel Fusano, in the same place visited with the international artists (Figures 1 and 2). You were there with me. Upon entering the clearing, we were faced with the sacred spectacle of burnt pine trees surrounded by much smaller and lively plants. I proposed a duo-based practice of leading and being led into a synesthetic encounter with the land with the eyes closed. I asked the person with the eyes open to listen and support the wandering of the person with the eyes closed and to offer her some materic and sensorial stimuli in the process. At some key moments of the exploration, the person with the eyes open was asked to pause the walk and say: “Open your eyes and look at yourself in the mirror”²⁵. How can the poetics of myth help us interpret what happened during this experience in terms of the possible meeting between the inner world of the participants and the world of death and regeneration in which we were immersed? How can it help us read the difficulties of contemporary humans to engage the somatic shift from having a body (as something experienced by a separate mind) to being guided by their felt sense of the body in the presence of others?

FLAVIA GALLO: When we returned to the site of the fire, something happened to the perception of the place of the human in the death of the tree and of the place of the death of the tree in the human. During the sensory walk one participant acted in a

²⁵ The task was inspired by the “Mirror Walk” developed by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown in “The Work that Reconnects”, a repertoire of facilitation strategies and tools for regeneration. Cfr. J. Macy and M. Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects*, British Columbia, New Society Publishers, 2014.

very unexpected manner: he destroyed the remains of the dead body of the last pine tree still standing in the middle of the clearing, with the broken edge twisted by the fire and the other half lying at its knees. (Figures 1 and 2) The tree covered by a burnt and very fragile layer of bark, which concealed its charred heart, was as if attacked by the fury of the participant who literally decorticated it, tore it to pieces, reduced it to a dust that had previously held itself together in a mortuary simulacrum, motionless and ethereal. The participant plunged his hands into the flesh of the trunk and, if his companion in the practice had not helped him contain the fury, he would have probably destroyed the trunk in its entirety. How does one contain an explosion of such vital despair at the sight of a form? And is it really to be contained? Or is it only to be observed, like a witness who takes care of the inevitable through his or her gaze?

This moment, filled with what the Greeks called *Thanatos*, sees a participant completely inside the action, letting go and following his own embodied call to feel more intensely, prepared for that dramatic release, through some steps that have occurred before. We cannot know whether it was one or the other image, which was the gift through which the possibility of that strong, expressive, inescapable feeling became available. When this participant entered the space of the ecological drama, what did he see? Our participant destroyed the simulacrum of death because he saw something underneath, he glimpsed a depth, a deeper perspective, and he put his hands into it: he wanted to see what was next, underneath, beyond. Judging whether it was right to let him continue or even stop his act would have belied that very ecosomatic correspondence between inside and outside that he had been asked to prepare for²⁶.

The assumption that the dead tree should arouse in us a meditative *pietas* proved fallacious: I “greet you, touch you, caress you and honour you” ... a sequence that tumultuously gave way to another, Dionysian power. As at the origin of the drama, the participant took the cult object, the object of the sacred, the most aesthetically interesting object, and tore it to shreds: he tore apart the god that lay within the simulacrum. More than that: he would have attacked the larger landscape of the performance had not the force specular to *Thanatos* intervened: *Eros*. The powerful drama of having destroyed this scenario dissolved when that participant began to walk, move, touch, and lead his partner, who now was the one with the eyes closed, within the landscape of a death revealed and deprived of its occult power. We witnessed, in just a few minutes, a splendid arc of images, of powerful embodied archetypes. Everything that the power of *Thanatos* had overshadowed became a dance in the embrace of holding each other together, of verifying whether one is still alive after death, whether after burials someone or something still has the possibility of coming out of mourning and realising that everything is now new, free, available for initiation: for kissing, for union, for fecundation. With everything

²⁶ On the relational dynamism and deep intimacy involved in the process of learning as a “call to existence”, cfr. E. Ducci, *Essere e comunicare*, Roma, Anicia, 2002.

destroyed, the aesthetic, beautiful and painful scenery disappears for all, and in an act of love the idea of a regeneration of all spectators, human and nonhuman, is reborn. A complete mythical dramaturgy: the destroyer leads his partner to initiate herself into pleasure after mourning, in the *Eros* of the enchantress maiden who discovers and plays out her seductive power, in the initial and delicate fire of spring.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, despite our increased means of connection, resources, capacity to reach each other, our ways of doing research together feel more inauthentic, constrained by obsolete models or ill-suited to capture, through contemplation, the truth of a perceptive state, of the quality of a gesture, of haptic presence. Ecosomatics presupposes a precise offer: an exchange between inner and outer worlds towards possible transformation. It is an attitude of reflective openness to the experience of the other. This open, creative psyche is what we can hope to cultivate through performance training.

Returning to Brook's words, we have been seeking "poetry, nobility, beauty, magic" and we are still thirsting for a Holy Theatre to move and inspire us. But «where should we look for it? In the clouds or on the ground?»²⁷ *La Selva* and the subsequent pedagogical interventions attempted to engage with the somatic perceptiveness of the participants and to approach the category of the "public" as one which extends beyond urban spaces and conventional theatre venues, directing our ecological imagination to the forest, the river, and the sea. It is here that the space of theatre can be reclaimed today!

In 1968 Brook asked Theatre and its artists to embrace the fundamental questions that shook the conscience of humanity after the two World Wars. Today, we ask Theatre to embrace the question of how we can form an alliance with the rest of nature and nurture a cultural resistance to the global system of extractivism, consumption, and exploitation that is devastating the planet. How can the arts create, through processes of widespread facilitation, an eco-cultural awareness that regenerates the community and the land? For this alliance to emerge, a community needs to be summoned to feel through the feelings of the others. In the ancient past, this convocation coincided with theatre-going and the alleged deep-rooted, intense perception of oneself amongst the others, just as performing artists do in order to reach an expanded, intense state of perceptiveness. This is a space in-between, a space that is not empty but a threshold in which playful vitality, contemplation of the body, and the becoming of action constitute a fabric of connectivity between the sensory experience of the individual and a shared sense of belonging to our territory and being responsible for future generations.

²⁷ P. Brook, *The Empty Space*, cit., p. 64.