

Bioacoustical Ethics: On Joakim Blattmann's *Treverk* (9)

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Abstract: Based on the artwork *Treverk* (9) by Norwegian artist Joakim Blattmann, this chapter discusses whether it is possible to exhibit a tree in a gallery space and still respect the tree as having inherent value, in accordance with Arne Næss and George Sessions' 'Principles of Deep Ecology'. Aspects such as the artist's intention, the origin of the materials and the installation of the final artwork are put into question and analysed from a deep ecological perspective. If the tree's desire is to live, then chopping it up and presenting it as a human spectacle in a gallery space is not to respect its inherent value. Yet the chapter argues that *Treverk* (9) can still inspire ecological thinking by disturbing the anthropocentric world view and displaying a deep relationality between the artist and the tree.

Keywords: sound art, deep ecology, anthropocentrism, trees

Introduction

The basic principles of deep ecology, formulated by Arne Næss and George Sessions in 1984, attack the anthropocentric world view by acknowledging the inherent value of other life forms. In their first basic principle, they state that 'the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human Life on Earth have value in themselves' (Næss & Sessions, 1986, p. 14). A tree is one such non-human life on earth. Its existence has value in itself, beyond providing paper for a book, beyond becoming cladding for a house and beyond being material for an artwork. It has value regardless

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of its usefulness to humans (Heidegger, 2013, p. 16).¹ Is it possible, then, to create an artwork out of a tree and still respect the tree as having inherent value? This conflict appears in artist Joakim Blattmann's artwork *Treverk (9)* (2018), exhibited at the National Annual Autumn Exhibition in 2018.

Naturally, exhibiting a real tree in an art gallery space means removing it from its natural habitat. It means detaching it from the earth in which it has developed its roots, maybe over hundreds of years. The weather to which it has adapted—changing from rain to snow to storms and sun, maybe gradually, maybe unexpectedly, is not transmissible. The art gallery is made for humans, by humans. To behold a painting, or a sculpture, or an installation, is not in the interest of a tree. Nor does it have an interest in being exhibited, probably. To exhibit a tree in a gallery space is to surrender it to the human senses for the sake of art. Which artistic strategies could be employed in order to ethically respect the inherent value of a tree—in accordance with Næss and Sessions' principles—at the same time as creating artistic value?

Killing the Tree

Five pieces of a tree were laid out in a composition on the gallery floor [figure 1]. Two of the pieces were branches and three of them were logs, probably stemming from the same tree. A black cable had been placed on each of the logs, connecting them to one main log placed furthest back, which was plugged into an electrical outlet. In the meeting between the cables and the logs, the audience could hear unrecognisable noises: irregular crunching, rattling, and pecking noises, creating what appeared to be an organic orchestra playing its biological symphony on a low frequency. It was as if the cables extracted the life-sound of the tree, although it was obviously dead.

The logs and the branches in *Treverk (9)* were cut off perfectly straight, like they usually are when cut with a chainsaw—this mechanical tool

¹ The mode of thinking that considers the material world as an unending resource for humans has been analysed by the philosopher Martin Heidegger in his term 'standing-reserve.'



Figure 1. Installation image of *Treverk (9)* [Sound installation] by Joakim Blattmann during Høstutstillingen 2018. Photo: Vegard Kleven/NBK. Reproduced with the permission of NBK. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

made by humans to cut trees, usually for human interests, such as: the purpose of providing wood for a cozy fireplace; exploiting the ground where it stood for a real estate development project; or removing it because it blocks a nice view. The logs in the artwork were cut off by a human with a human-made tool, presented for human eyes, in a human-made exhibition space. Quartered, on the ground, the tree lay on the gallery floor, taking its final breaths as an artwork. It is clear that if the tree's desire was to live, its interest has already been violated in the bare description of the artwork. The tree in a gallery space has value as art, but not inherently.

However, the crunching, rattling, and pecking sounds emanating from the logs opened up the inaccessible world of a non-human life. To create this artwork, Joakim Blattmann had recorded the sounds that exist inside a tree: the sounds of the wood twisting, changing humidity and of insects crawling around in their home. Because of their high frequency, these sounds are normally inaudible to human ears. The artwork reveals that trees have a life of their own. They live and have inherent value. They

have abilities and capacities that are beyond human sensory experience and understanding. With this as its purpose, it seems in line with Næss and Sessions' principles, but then again, the artwork is a quartered tree.

It is important to notice that Blattmann stresses that he does not kill trees for the *Treverk* series himself (Blattmann, 2018).² For *Treverk (9)*, he made agreements with landowners and acquired the logs and branches after they had already been cut. This means that he did not sacrifice any trees for the sake of the artwork. The tree was sacrificed for other reasons, then turned into an artwork. One could say that Blattmann is a mere collector of trees, and then he exhibits the trees together with their sounds. Seen from this perspective, Blattmann gives new life to the logs, as they had already been robbed of their status as a living tree before they ended up as an artwork. Yet, returning to the crunching, rattling, and pecking noises presented to the audience, the new life given to the tree is somewhat strange and eerie.

Life Illusions

The placement of the cables upon the logs resembled a stethoscope gently listening to a patient's heart, trying to locate their heartbeats [figure 2]. The seeming lack of a logical pattern in the heartbeats of the trees made *Treverk (9)* appear to be an *interactive* sound installation. The sounds, however, were not live transmissions originating from the logs on the gallery floor, but were pre-recorded tree sounds from Blattmann's personal sound archive.³ What seemed to be a pure reflection of the inner life of the tree had, in fact, a mediator, making the work less vibrant and flourishing than the sounds gave the impression of. It might seem like Blattmann had the idea of presenting the hidden phonic life of the tree, but as it was not possible to do so inside an art gallery without bringing the tree inside and

2 On his website, Joakim Blattmann states: 'The trees used in these works were already cut or had fallen as a result of strong winds (found material) before I started working with them. No trees were cut by me to make these works.'

3 With the help of a recording device, Blattmann records and collects sounds that humans are normally unable to hear: insects crawling in the bark or crackling and clicking sounds resulting from moisture in the tree.



Figure 2. Detail of *Treverk* (3) by Joakim Blattmann at Oslo Prosjektrom in 2015. Photo: Joakim Blattmann. Reproduced with the permission of Joakim Blattmann. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

effectively killing it, he managed to find a way to convey the idea of life nevertheless.

From this perspective, the logs appear to have no function beyond being an aesthetic backdrop to the recordings. But the main log in the artwork—the one connected to all the cables—had an active part in the wood concert nevertheless. The sequences and order of the crunching, rattling and pecking noises were determined by the main log’s humidity; sensors registered biosignals from the main log and sent them to a computer, allowing the tree to influence which pre-recorded tree sounds the audience could hear. As an uncanny orchestra conductor, the dead log used its remaining life to orchestrate a complex composition, animating the rest of the cut-off dead logs in the gallery room.

When ‘humanising’ the tree’s sounds, that is, when transforming the sounds into something audible to the human ear, technology participates to some degree; however, the organic processes *inherent* in the tree do the rest. To let the humidity of the tree trigger the recordings in *Treverk* (9) means that the life inside the dead tree actually was the *creative force of the artwork*. Although the tree was mutilated, it took the

place as sovereign within the frame of the artwork set up by Blattmann, as if it still had some control of its ghostly existence. The tree's desire to live had been violated, it was placed in a human context, but still, it became an active participant in the creation of the artwork.

Advocating the Life of Trees

One way to interpret *Treverk (9)* is as a demonstration of ruthless human behaviour towards trees. The artwork might be interpreted as saying *look at what humans do to trees! They violate an inherent life-form just because it blocks the view!* If one believes that all forms of life have equal value, then viewing a quartered tree would be as brutal as viewing a quartered fish exhibited side by side with sound recordings from when it was alive, or a quartered horse displayed together with sound recordings from its lively whinnies, or a quartered human with her voice like a haunting ghost. The different levels of discomfort that one may feel imagining these artworks could reveal a hierarchy of life-value. To view *Treverk (9)* in this light gives the work an activist undertone, as a political statement highlighting the mass killing of trees for the purpose of being resources for humans.

The question of the purpose of the artwork changes as we consider another work in Blattmann's *Treverk* series, *Treverk (13)* (2019) [figure 3]. In *Treverk (13)*, the artist wired up a living tree growing in the backyard of the Oslo gallery Atelier Nord, connecting it to cables that transmitted its biosignals to a computer (Atelier Nord, 2019). Here, the dilemma with regard to the act of killing has changed. The tree has not been detached from the earth in which it had developed its roots; it is not dead. Although the concept of the recordings being activated by the humidity within the tree is the same in the two artworks, the wood has a different life-status, and thereby the focus shifts from the act of killing trees to the creative interaction between logs and technology. *Treverk (13)* thereby has more of an investigative rather than activist undertone. Considering the more activist undertone in *Treverk (9)* than in *Treverk (13)*, number nine in the series can be interpreted as encompassing multiple meanings: as being about the life of the tree and as being about the tree as a tool to trigger



Figure 3. Part of the sound installation *Treverk (13)*, an 8-channel site-specific sound installation based on audio recordings of minuscule movements in an 200 year old maple in the backyard of the gallery Atelier Nord, 2019. Photo: Istvan Virag. Reproduced with the permission of Joakim Blattmann and Istvan Virag . All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission

sound. Yet, as art is not obligated to portray reality *correctly*, compared to journalism, for example, it is harder to ethically judge how correct an ecological message is conveyed.

The Deep Ecology of *Treverk (9)*

Let us return to Næss and Sessions' first basic principle of deep ecology and consider it in relation to Blattmann's *Treverk (9)*. The tree is an example of non-human life. As it is quartered and placed inside an art gallery,

the criteria of the well-being and flourishing can hardly be said to be fulfilled. *Treverk (9)* thereby does not fulfill this first part of the principle. Then there is the question of purpose: Næss and Sessions write that the inherent values of other beings must be ‘independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.’ Here the dilemma of art as a concept appears, as art is usually made by humans for humans.⁴ It is frequently based on, or partly mediated by, written or verbal language—skills that only humans possess. Placed in the framework of contemporary art discourse, *Treverk (9)* can barely be said to fulfill the principle of independence from usefulness for humans either. It is an artwork and it has value as art.

Based on this synthesis, it would be reasonable to dismiss Blattmann’s work as not having a deep ecological base. But perhaps it can still inspire ecological—or relational—thinking. In this artwork, non-human life is presented to the human senses. The artwork creates awareness of the shortcomings of human perception: there is an entire bioacoustic world in which humans do not have access. Realising this disturbs the foundation of the anthropocentric world view. Humans only record parts of the world, as author Mandy-Suzanne Wong highlights:

Alongside people and their descriptions and discussions, nonhumans do historical work, recording and remembering history. This means that history is felt, heard, seen, tasted, smelled, and done, as much as it is written and spoken. It means that accounts of history are always incomplete, especially discursive ones, and that some aspects of history are beyond human understanding. Sound art can do some historical work that language can’t. (Wong, 2016, p. 363)

Becoming aware of the abilities of non-human life and its participation in the earth’s own history and existence might inspire a deeper care for non-human life, which is a crucial step towards a redefined relationship between humans and their surroundings. Not only with the goal of saving humanity from the consequences of a long-term violence towards

4 I write usually because there have been cases of art created for non-humans. Take, for example, the projects of Oslo Apiary and Aviary as discussed by Emma Karlsen in Chapter 14, ‘Future Stories.’

non-human life on earth, but simply because non-human life has inherent value, in and of itself.

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