

DEEPLY LISTENING TO FORESTS

On Wälder / Hutan by Katia Engel

On April 1st 2023 I attended the research presentation Wälder / Hutan by choreographer Katia Engel, dancers Polett Kasza and Ari Ersandi and sound artist Felix-Florian Tödtloff. The presentation took place in the old chapel of Kunstquartier Bethanien, Berlin, in the form of a durational sound and dance performance, divided in six musical fragments made of field recordings and performed live.

The field recordings were collected at various times of the day, by the artist and her collaborators, in the Serrahn and Grumsin Beech forests in Germany and the Kutai National park, in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, between 2018 and 2023.

The sonorous dramaturgy of the performance offers different parts of a day's cycle, from sunrise to sunset, across the several years of research and the two countries. The work deals with the disappearance of primary forests and the loss of their collective sound history, and the dancers embody movement explorations and choreographies, shaped by their cultural identity and dance background.

The audience is invited to move freely in space, and also to exit and re-enter at any point during the three hour presentation.

The following text is an account of my personal experience of the work, later informed by a conversation with the artist.

Upon opening the squeaky, wooden door of the old chapel, I find myself in a sensorially familiar place, although it is my first time here. The sound of birds singing while I enter the space is well-known to me; it is similar to the sound that accompanies my morning walks in the park. I might not be able to name the species of bird from the birdsong, but I recognise their voices and that makes me feel at ease in this moment of arrival. I climb the stairs between the atrium and the aisle to take a seat on the floor, leaning my back against one of the pillars that frames the nave.

The atmosphere feels calm and bright simultaneously; the pillar could be a tree and I could be settling in a forest made of sound. In the centre of the nave two dancers are sitting in stillness leaning back to back against each other. In the audience surrounding them, some are seated, some are lying down on the floor. We are all in a state of listening and being present, together. My gaze drifts away from the performers and to the architecture of the old chapel, the walls are all white and emptied of religious iconography. Stripped of its symbolism this place is filled with Nature. My mind projects various shades of green on the white wall behind the altar. The soundscape playing through the speakers shapes another holy place, the cathedral of the forest, in this case the ancient Serrahn beech forest.

Gradually this soundscape fades away and a different one takes its acoustic space; I find myself in a totally unfamiliar place, and I read on the program note that we are in the Kutai National park, in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. A recording of cicadas, with their strong rhythmical stridulation, sets a repetitive pattern that guides my auditory attention and similarly sets the two dancers in motion, namely into grounded movements on the floor.

Their bodies expand and contract, their limbs curling in and stretching out in alternation, embodying the tension of the sound score and gaining distance from each other. In this pulsating rhythm, they morph in and out of different postures, soft shapes sliding and rolling on the floor. Suddenly one of them is lying with his back towards me, and as he arches his head backwards, our eyes meet for a short while. I witness his presence in wonder, as I would observe the close landing of a bird or the vibrating of a perched cicada.

Accompanied by the sound of the wind blowing in the ancient Grumsin beech forest, the performer Ari Ersandi dances his solo, inspired by personal memories of his relationship with the forest. He is based in and originally from Indonesia, and the quality of his movement is very new to me, like the sound of Kutai National Park. His fluttering fingers and rapid hands, placed over his ears, trigger my imagination of animals and dances I have never encountered. Again I witness my limitations in the knowledge of both near and far remote landscapes, animal populations and traditional forms of dance and expressions.

Classically trained dancer Polett Kasza and her movement vocabulary resonates differently in my imagination as I find a familiarity with it; the sense of elevation and lightness of her elegant limbs reminds me of tree branches waving in the wind.

And yet to experience these two bodies dancing alongside each other and together, accompanied by the multilayered and complex soundscapes recorded in such distant and unknown places, opens up very many questions about belonging to, familiarity with and awareness of a living organism such as a forest and its other-than-human life.

As the performance progresses in time, offering sonorous accounts of the long research process that spans several years, the soundscape transforms into a more altered musical composition performed by the sound artist Felix-Florian Tödtloff.

It reinterprets interspecies communication within these forests, where different species have evolved alongside each other by occupying different frequencies, in order to make themselves audible through the dense canopy of screeching, squeaking and chirping.

Wälder / Hutan transports me back and forth between Germany and Indonesia, the first being the place I live in for several years now, the second being a place I have never visited. Gradually I realise how little I know of the non-human inhabitants of the forests I have bathed in. Here, knowledge is not necessarily an exercise of taxonomy, but an experiential practice of listening and being with the non-human world. I realise, I might recognise the singing of some birds, but how little do I know about their patterns and traditions, their cultures and their threat of extinction? I might recognise their voices, but how little do I know about their loss of habitat and their inexorable silencing?

With this work Katia Engel and her collaborators bring together the biophonies of various natural landscapes, pointing at their cultural relevance in times of climate collapse and loss of biodiversity all around the world.

They invite their audience to a deep listening, of calls and vocalizations, rituals and conversations among the non-humans inhabitants of familiar and unfamiliar forests.

Through dance they offer their personal memories and connection to these endangered polyrhythms, allowing their audience to become aware of their own personal connection to and memories of the forest.