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# Posthuman Practices of Care beyond the Entropocene

## How the FARN. collective Designs Ways of Thinking-With in *The Shape of Trouble to Come*

### Abstract

In *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* (2021) the FARN. collective responds to the actual condition marked by indeterminacy and environmental destruction. In the ruins of capitalism (Anna Tsing), represented on stage with electronic waste of computer technology, the German theatre collective presents in an experimental trial various speculative stories that allow the spectators to see themselves as part of a larger ecological context and attune the perspective to polyphonic assemblages with multispecies worlds. These world-conceptions presented in various scenes are based on texts and ideas of Donna Haraway, Ursula K. Le Guin,

and Paul B. Preciado. In reference to Anna Tsing's attempt to focus on the "arts of noticing," author focuses in this article on practices of care which lead to a thinking in relationalities, especially to a thinking-with (Haraway). This thinking-with is a way of living-with, being aware of troubling relations and significant otherness that transforms those involved in the relation and the worlds we live in. Analyzing different polyphonic assemblages which the FARN collective created author shows how posthuman practices of care create trouble in established epistemologies and leads to an experience of becoming and of being vulnerable to others.

## Keywords

arts of noticing, practices of care, FARN collective, relationality, posthuman ritual

## Abstrakt

**Posthumanistyczne praktyki troski poza entropocenem: Jak kolektyw FARN projektuje sposoby współ-myślenia w *The Shape of Trouble to Come***

W *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* (2021) kolektyw FARN reaguje na aktualną sytuację naznaczoną niestałością i degradacją środowiska. W ruinach kapitalizmu (Anna Tsing), reprezentowanych na scenie przez elektroniczne odpady technologii komputerowej, niemiecki kolektyw teatralny eksperymentuje z różnymi spekulatywnymi historiami, które pozwalają widzom zobaczyć siebie jako część szerszego ekologicznego kontekstu i dostroić swoją perspektywę do polifonicznych asamblaży z wielogatunkowymi światami. Przedstawiane w kolejnych scenach koncepcje świata oparte są na tekstach i ideach Donny Haraway, Ursuli K. Le Guin i Paula B. Preciado. Nawiązując do „sztuki uważności” Anny Tsing, autorka w artykule skupia się na praktykach troski, które prowadzą do myślenia w relacjach, a zwłaszcza do współ-myślenia (Haraway). To współ-myślenie jest sposobem współ-bycia, świadomości kłopotliwych relacji i znaczącej inności, które przekształcają uczestników relacji i światy, w których żyjemy. Analizując różne polifoniczne asamblaże, które stworzył kolektyw FARN, autorka pokazuje, jak posthumanistyczne praktyki troski stwarzają kłopoty w zastałych epistemologiach i prowadzą do doświadczenia stawania się i wrażliwości na innych.

## Słowa kluczowe

sztuki uważności, praktyki troski, kolektyw FARN, relacyjność, postludzki rytuał

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As Anna Tsing outlines in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*,<sup>1</sup> the tendency to create ruins and perpetuate the ruination of the world is inherent in the capitalist system. It is built and depends upon wasting and ruination, and tales of progress encompass continual degeneration, violence, and exploitation, which are all deeply embedded in capitalist accumulation tendencies.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the anthropologist draws attention to the fact that life is possible in an environment that has been devastated by human activity. In this uncertainty of time, where everyday efforts don't align with a teleology of progressive improvement, living is a state of precarity, a modality of being marked by indeterminacy. As Tsing contends, to get a sense of precarity—to survive it and to think through it with social analysis—requires “arts of noticing” driven by curiosity. The old toolkits obviously no longer work, and there is a need to see life in different terms to understand the ways it breaks down but also grows anew amidst the blasted ruins of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> But what could the new toolkits be? Based on Anna Tsing's argument that precarity is the condition of our time, the FARN. collective takes the anthropologist's requirement of an “arts of noticing” seriously and responds to it with an eighty-minutes-long music theatre play. *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* is a coproduction between the collective and two major German theatres, Schauspiel Leipzig and Schauspielhaus Bochum, as well as with the art center E-Werk Freiburg. It was premiered on June 18, 2021 in Leipzig, but was also streamed online due to Covid-19 pandemic guidelines.<sup>4</sup> The German theatre collective explains in a conversation that is staged as well as printed in the program booklet of their play that the aim is to draw strength from the indeterminacy and uncertainty of the present time in order to create alliances that make new thinking possible out of a sense of commonality.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I examine how the FARN. collective reflects the acknowledgement of the human role in making sense of such alliances that should allow us

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<sup>1</sup> See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 19–20, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Tsing, 17–25.

<sup>4</sup> In my analysis, I rely on the recording produced for online streaming, which was first shown on June 18, 2021 on the website of Schauspiel Leipzig. The play was staged the next day and all the following dates with an audience in venue. See <https://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/ensemble/farn-collective/>.

<sup>5</sup> See the excerpt of an interview with the FARN. collective, “Die Lust auf die Zukunft” in *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* (Leipzig: Schauspiel Leipzig, 2021), 25–31, <https://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/spielplan/archiv/t/the-shape-of-trouble-to-come/>.

to find new toolkits and to bring to emergence new relations of thinking. As I outline in a close reading of various scenes of *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* these relations of thinking are also related to practices of care—or as María Puig de la Bellacasa argues in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*,<sup>6</sup> they are related to a thinking with care. Following Puig de la Bellacasa’s argument, that posthuman practices of care, especially, create trouble in established logics, I ask how they allow to reflect new possible relations with more-than-human entanglements. I base the analysis on Tsing’s suggestion to focus on the arts of noticing. As Tsing outlines in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, it is helpful to attune to the multiple simultaneous rhythms, voices, and entanglements which are encountered in multispecies worlds. In the process of noticing, the worlds of more-than-human beings become visible or—more adequate—sensed, and the polyphonic attributes of multispecies assemblages are foregrounded.<sup>7</sup> The arts of noticing refer to the ability to perceive multispecies stories. I focus primarily on the creation of polyphonic assemblages the FARN. collective uses to create an awareness of these more-than-human alliances and ecological entanglements: How does their posthuman ritual lead to the noticing of other stories and rhythms—stories and rhythms of living on and of making lives and kinships in places and worlds circumscribed as futureless by political and economic regimes?

## What Stories-to-Come We Tell to Tell Other Stories

In *The Shape of Trouble to Come*, the book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*,<sup>8</sup> written by Donna Haraway, was used by the FARN. collective as a starting point. The book is a call for speculative storytelling to offer a vision of a transition from the Anthropocene, an era of entropic decay and waste—or what Bernard Stiegler calls an entropocene<sup>9</sup>—to design a utopian perspective of the world we are living in. In her book Haraway describes what she has come to call speculative fabulation, or SF, as a “practice and process; it is

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<sup>6</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 22–25.

<sup>8</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, ed. and trans. Daniel Ross (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), <https://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/the-neganthropocene/>.

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*The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual*, performance by FARN. collective, Schauspiel Leipzig, 2021

becoming-with each other in surprising relays, it is a figure for ongoingness.”<sup>10</sup> Speculative fabulation is, as Haraway remarks in a footnote, also a “mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding.”<sup>11</sup> While speculative fabulations can be crucial tools for imagining future-presents that are different than the world we inhabit now, situated feminisms ask to attend to the dynamic specificities of myriad situated knowledges. To explore the coming together of plants, animals, and critters as relational entanglements, or kinships, Haraway argues that not only does it matter “what matters we use to think other matters, but also what stories we tell to tell other stories.”<sup>12</sup> Already in 1986, the novelist and philosopher Ursula K. Le Guin offered an essential tool for a speculative

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 213.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Haraway, 12.

storytelling. In her essay entitled “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,”<sup>13</sup> Le Guin raises the question of what if mankind’s primary invention was not the spear but a basket of wild oats. She quoted a feminist history of technology that focuses on collective livelihoods and recognizes in the collectors’ carrying cases tools for telling strangely realistic fictions. Yet, until recently speculative feminist fabulation and the Anthropocene concept as a critical concept and analytical idea had rarely been a topic on major German theatre stages.<sup>14</sup> *The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual* is one of the first plays in Germany that deals with the speculative fabulations written by Le Guin. Her writing, especially her text “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” is an important point of reference for thinking about the Anthropocene, especially for Tsing and Haraway to reflect on the narrative of the Anthropocene and possible, more-than-human and ecological futures.

“The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” as a new narrative form by which to tell stories without a male hero is used by the actress Sandra Hüller. In her opening speech of the play, she recites the most essential passages of the essay. In Le Guin’s words, she describes how the collectors with their carrier bags, their vessels and containers full of wild oats, seeds, nuts, sprouts, and roots, would have been perfectly content with their vegan menu, but in the face of the bloody stories of the protagonist who sets out to kill the mammoth, and the unique handling of his weapons, everyone else fell silent in astonishment: “Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat-patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn’t their story. It’s his.”<sup>15</sup> Rhetorically skillful, the recited passages of Le Guin’s essay show how all participants become requisites of the hero’s story, although they would have their own story to tell. The quote demonstrates how the author shifts the perspective of whose stories can be told. In her argumentation, Le Guin is less concerned with the actual past than with showing that stories can change

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<sup>13</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Since October 2020, there has been an initiative named Theatre of the Anthropocene in cooperation with Humboldt University in Berlin. Classical theatre plays are restaged at various venues under an anthropocentric horizon of threat, while scientists and artists discuss the concept and lecture performances explore the connection between ecology and aesthetics. Furthermore, Gerko Egert and other theater scholars proposed 2016 the concept of *Bühnen des Nicht-Menschlichen* (stages of the non-human) to study a “posthuman performativity” (Karen Barad) on theatre stages. See Gerko Egert et al., “Bühnen des Nicht-Menschlichen,” in *Episteme des Theaters: Aktuelle Kontexte von Wissenschaft, Kunst und Öffentlichkeit*, eds. Milena Cairo et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), 193–216.

<sup>15</sup> Le Guin, “Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” 2.

the world. In this respect, reciting “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” is more of a thought-provoking, speculative gesture which is used by the FARN. collective to invite the audience to question narratives that have become self-evident to the point of invisibility. The questions that the FARN. collective is seeking to address in their production are, in the face of the impending end of the world, which stories should be presented on stage, and how these stories bear witness to the interconnectedness with the world that Tsing and Haraway call for.

*The Shape of Trouble to Come* is an experimental trial—or as the FARN. collective describes it: a posthuman ritual, in which they work through different shapes of responses through various scenarios. On the website of Schauspiel Leipzig the collective published a collection of texts, quotes, videos, and images that accompanies the process of creating the production and that gives insight into an open process of research.<sup>16</sup> In the play itself, Sandra Hüller remarks at the end of her opening speech: “Tonight there will be enough time to gather lots of wild oats and sow them too. To sing to the little ones, to listen to their jokes, and to watch the newts, and that’s not the end of the story. Because there are still seeds to be collected, there is still room in the bag.”<sup>17</sup> These words refer to an emblematic metaphor: Every wild oat that is planted will grow into a story that is not yet but is one to come. To reorient and pay attention to these new speculative stories allows us to perceive the many potential world-making projects—or worlding, as Haraway puts it—that emerge from practical activities and that are not limited to human doings. My concern is as follows: If we take the approaches presented by the FARN. collective seriously, how do they challenge anthropocentric traditions of thought? And how do their actions on stage interweave with the referred speculative and philosophical texts? Can their posthuman ritual actually lead to a change in being with others?

## A Posthuman Ritual

The FARN. collective was founded in 2016. Six professional theatre-makers working as actors, directors, dramaturges, musicians, or stage designers in various theatre institutions in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland started an ongoing exchange. They understand theatre as a collective practice of thinking and acting: They read and discuss texts and make music together. Within the

<sup>16</sup> “Fadenspiele: Zu *The Shape of Trouble to Come*,” Schauspiel Leipzig website, <https://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/material/the-shape-of-trouble-to-come/>, last accessed August 9, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Transcribed from the recorded performance and translated by the author.

collective the members search for forms of being together where there are no fixed structures or hierarchies. Also, they work with no pre-existing forms or aesthetics, no certainties, and no truths that they want to rely on. They do not want to find answers, but ask themselves plenty of questions which they negotiate in the discussions and especially in the ritualistic experiments and preceding research phases<sup>18</sup> upon which their productions are based.

As the subtitle of their third production suggests, *The Shape of Trouble to Come* is not designed as a classical play, but as a “Posthuman Ritual.” According to anthropologist Victor Turner the ritual is a practice in which religion and faith, aesthetics and magic, and philosophy and history manifest themselves. Participants of a ritual refer to a repertory of bodily forms of action and memory such as oral storytelling, dancing, and singing, but also involve a range of symbolic acts. The ritual is a transitional process with a liminal phase in which normative economic, social, and political constraints are lifted and new ways of (symbolic) acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out and can be discarded or accepted.<sup>19</sup> This experience of a liminal phase can make it easier to deal with a crisis or a state of precarity that a particular community is facing. It is not the event and its interpretation that is decisive in ritual action, but the experience of being together. The experience of being together is the starting point for the FARN. collective’s collaboration. So, when rituals have the potential to create dynamic relationships between an individual and the collective, but also between human and nature, present and past, that can be looked at anew, what potential lies in the form of a ritual with regard to the creation of alliances that make new thinking possible out of a sense of commonality? Victor Turner proposes in his books *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* and *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* the concept of *communitas*.<sup>20</sup> *Communitas* is a form of non-hierarchical, temporal community that is elevated from the fixed social structures and develops in the liminal phase of rites of passage in pre-industrial societies. According to Turner, *communitas* can also arise in industrial societies in the area of the “liminoid,” in a sphere of leisure unburdened by normative constraints, of scientific experimentation and artistic creation, but also in extreme situations such as torture or war.<sup>21</sup> As

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<sup>18</sup> “Fadenspiele: Zu *The Shape of Trouble to Come*.”

<sup>19</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), 28, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 47–48; *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 96, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 46.



a *communitas* is characterized by its immediacy and indeterminacy it situates the experience of being together in a not-yet status, a disruptive moment which refers to all what is “not yet settled, concluded and known”<sup>22</sup> but “that might be, could be perhaps even should be.”<sup>23</sup> It is a moment open for thinking a new possible world and for transformation. From a posthuman perspective, which abandons the separation between humans and non-humans and thus also between culture and nature, forms of commonality rather mean a dynamic and polyphonic relationality between various beings. To contextualize their play as a posthuman ritual allows the FARN. collective to explore ways of storytelling and acting as well as to encounter more-than-human kinship and entanglements with a slightly different approach than those of usual theatre practices.

Specifically, for this production they went outside to wild meadows and fields and took on the role of gardeners who were engaged in the practice of composting. Composting is a material practice of attention and care whereby organic waste is transformed into nutrient-rich soil. In *Staying with the Trouble* Haraway adopts the concept of compost as a thinking figure and metaphor to call for new posthumus stories, in which humans and non-humans become aware of their deep entanglement with the earth’s soil.<sup>24</sup> This becoming aware, Haraway describes this way: “Critters—human and not—become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly worlding and unworlding.”<sup>25</sup> In the research process the FARN. collective buried electronic devices, toys, and musical instruments such as a keyboard, all of which emitted sounds in the soil, drawing attention to what was in the soil. In doing this in a ritualistic way, they attuned the focus on the humus, that becomes alive because it, or what is hidden within it, emits sounds. This approach to working together and to discussing new forms of futures and commonalities is—as actress Sandra Hüller states in an interview—“a way of being with one another, of being vulnerable to others.”<sup>26</sup> It is about the process and the question of how they can continue as human beings in this world without destroying the world in which they live and everything that surrounds them. Here, in this earthly worlding and unworlding, the connection to Tsing’s observation becomes significant:

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<sup>22</sup> Turner, 76-77.

<sup>23</sup> Turner, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4, 101, 156-17.

<sup>25</sup> Haraway, 97.

<sup>26</sup> FARN. collective, “Die Lust auf die Zukunft,” 25-31; “Im Gespräch mit Sandra Hüller,” Schauspiel Leipzig website, <https://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/material/im-gespraech-mit-sandra-hueller>, last accessed July 10, 2024.



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*The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual,*  
performance by FARN. collective,  
Schauspiel Leipzig, 2021

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“Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others.”<sup>27</sup> The anthropologist sees in unpredictable encounters a state of transformation, of everything being in flux—just as the liminal state of rituals that Victor Turner describes. Tsing outlines: “Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our other.”<sup>28</sup> So, with the posthuman ritual and the practice of composting, the FARN. collective tries to study lived practices of being and transformation in a multispecies world. But not with the intention of proposing an alternative future, a utopia, but rather to share the experience in these shifting assemblages that leads to a possible future.

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<sup>27</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Tsing, 20.

Or to quote the collective: to get a “desire for the future.”<sup>29</sup> It is not so much about what the future looks like, but about the doing experienced in the ritual.

The reference to the “posthuman” in the subtitle of the play directs the perspective towards a transgression of previous conceptions of the human being. This transgression is entwined with other entanglements beyond the capitalist logic of exploitation and progress to which Haraway refers in *Staying with the Trouble*. As the FARN. collective was inspired by the book<sup>30</sup> and also recites various excerpts on stage, the reference makes another hermeneutic perspective on the play evident: The title, *The Shapes of Trouble to Come*, clearly alludes to the term “trouble,” which Haraway describes in the introduction as an interesting word, one that “derives from a thirteenth-century French verb meaning ‘to stir up,’ ‘to make cloudy,’ ‘to disturb.’”<sup>31</sup> As we are living in “disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times,” Haraway sees several tasks we have to engage in: “to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response,” “to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present,” and “to make trouble, to stir up potent responses to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.”<sup>32</sup> According to Haraway, staying with the trouble does not mean imagining a future for coming generations, but learning to be truly present “as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”<sup>33</sup> The production of the FARN. collective alludes to this staying with the trouble.

## Listening As a Disruptive Doing

This staying with the trouble is represented in an emblematic opening scene, which anticipates what the collective demands as a posthuman practice: listening to each other, especially to those who are not yet acknowledged or perceived as beings equivalent to humans. Actress Sandra Hüller sits at a table and listens to a piano piece from an old recording device while Christoph Müller (from the ensemble of Schauspiel Leipzig) takes care of the plants which are placed

<sup>29</sup> FARN. collective, “Die Lust auf die Zukunft,” 29.

<sup>30</sup> Haraway’s book is mentioned in the program booklet as one of the texts that served the collective as a starting point for their “posthuman ritual.”

<sup>31</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Haraway, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Haraway, 1.

in small glass containers on a shelf on the left side of the stage. The plants emit a sound every time they are touched and thus seem to talk to the two actors on stage and to the audience. Reviewers describe the sounds as incomprehensible, distorted, and pitch-shifted upwards. They are reminiscent of comic figures, of children's babble, of animals or of the extraterrestrial from Steven Spielberg's film *E.T.* (1982).<sup>34</sup> With the shift presented right at the opening of the play to focus on the speech of plants, the audience is invited to also perceive plants as beings that have a voice and stories to tell. To listen to their stories, however, it is necessary to give them a language on the theatre stage. This language is enhanced by technical aids such as the wiring of the leaves to sound components. The members of the collective developed an instrument, a "plant organ", that lets plants and humans cooperate to control a synthesizer. In this way, the FARN. collective points out that plants can also communicate or more precisely are able to articulate themselves. To listen to them means to direct one's own perception away from only human communication towards posthuman forms of "speech." The plants can also be perceived as spectators who participate in the FARN. collective's posthuman ritual and are taken care of by the actors. As there is no human audience present at the premiere, the plants are actually those who are addressed by the actors as an audience and those who also respond when they are touched. What is learned through touching depends on the response of the other being touched. As a result, in listening to the plants, there is a shift towards a multispecies world that resituates the actors and the human audience in a speculative possible world in which a new sensitivity is required. María Puig de la Bellacasa argues, that touch can be understood as a grounded, speculative practice, where knowledge unfolds between subjects whose ability to know is mediated by how they reach out, and by the receptivity of the other. As the feminist philosopher outlined in *Matters of Care*, touching is a critically disruptive doing: "touch expresses a sense of material-embodied relationality that seemingly eschews abstractions and detachments that have been associated with dominant epistemologies of knowledge-as-vision."<sup>35</sup> Or, as she continues: "the haptic disrupts the prominence of vision as a metaphor for distant knowing as well the distance of critique, but it also calls for ethical questioning."<sup>36</sup> Encoun-

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<sup>34</sup> Georg Kasch, "So endet das Zeitalter des Menschen," *Nachtkritik.de*, June 18, 2021, <https://nachtkritik.de/nachtkritiken/deutschland/sachsen/leipzig/schauspiel-leipzig/the-shape-of-trouble-to-come-schauspiel-leipzig-sandra-hueller-und-das-farn-collective-spueren-bildstark-alternativen-posthumanen-lebensformen-nach>; Christine Dössel, "Auf du und du mit der Natur," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 20, 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/sandra-hueller-farn-collective-auf-du-und-du-mit-der-natur-1.5327785>.

<sup>35</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 20.

tering the pitched voices of the plants that appear as separate, but simultaneous melodies and distortions, it allows the actors as well as the human audience to train a new way of listening. This listening is characterized by the perceiving of the sounds of harmonies and dissonances, and in the multiple temporal rhythms and trajectories that are significant for a polyphonic assemblage.<sup>37</sup> With this sensitivity to discovering traces of those more-than-human actors, the plants are bestowed a political stake. The multitude of relations in a multispecies world that is often invisibly but inescapably implicated in many matters of concern becomes apparent. But how is engagement with touch opening to other ways of thinking? Touching as a modality that inflects other ways of knowing entails a form of seeing that is sensitive to its own vulnerable, subjective, and relational grounding. As a practice of care, touching reveals “a world constantly done and undone through encounters that accentuate both the attraction of closeness as well as awareness of alterity.”<sup>38</sup> Taking Puig de la Bellacasa’s perspective seriously, it could be argued that this scene staged by the FARN. collective is about relating to a multispecies world that becomes as a figuration of the other and that allows oneself to be affected, touched, and unsettled by this alterity.<sup>39</sup>

## Encountering the Metamorphosis

In Ursula Le Guin’s vision of storytelling, stories should never end, but rather lead to further stories. The FARN. collective follows this principle and creates in every new scene a world that deals with other polyphonic attributes of multispecies assemblages. In order to describe the relationality to polyphonic assemblages and to do justice to their claim, they attempt to identify and utilize different modes of representation. After the opening speech of actress Sandra Hüller, the red curtain opens and upon the stage heaps of soils. In the center is a piano. Actor Michael Graessner, dressed in concert clothes, briefly pretends to play the piano, before starting to dismantle the instrument or, rather, to rebuild it in a curious way. Again, the dominant epistemologies of knowledge-as-vision are questioned. It is worth taking a look at what is being deconstructed and newly constructed in the truest sense of the word in this scene. The piano no longer

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<sup>37</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Puig, de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 115.

<sup>39</sup> This thought also follows the argumentation of Julia Schade. See Julia Schade, “Wie denkt es sich aus der Relationalität heraus: Von anthropozänen Illusionen und kritisch relationalen Experimenten,” in *Szenen kritischer Relationalität*, eds. Charlotte Bolwin et al. (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2024), 43. <https://doi.org/10.14619/2225>.



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*The Shape of Trouble to Come: A Posthuman Ritual*, performance by FARN. collective, Schauspiel Leipzig, 2021

appears as a single object, but as a set of organs or, more precisely, of artefacts. As its anatomy is exposed to the audience, the instrument is transformed into a technical organism with its own inner life. This impression is enhanced by the fact that the piano does not fall silent but continues to emit sounds. As Paul B. Preciado states in one of his essays published in the book *An Apartment on Uranus*, fragments of which are included in the program booklet: “If animals were at some point conceived of and treated as machines, then machines little by little became techno-animals existing among techno-living animals.”<sup>40</sup> When life is breathed into the piano, it is perceived as a techno-animal: The machine, like the animal, acquires agency, it is transformed “into a new political subject of an animalism yet to-come.”<sup>41</sup> Preciado outlines: “Animalism is not a naturalism.

<sup>40</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (London: Semiotext(e), 2020), 92.

<sup>41</sup> Preciado, *Apartment on Uranus*, 92.



It is an entire ritual system. A counter-technology producing awareness.”<sup>42</sup> The shift from the piano into a techno-animal is, like the demand for listening to the stories-to-come, a suggestion that nothing has to remain the same, but can be performatively rearranged, rethought, and reassembled with a focus upon an entanglement in a larger ecological context.

On a screen above the stage, the scene in which the anatomy of the piano is exposed is entitled *Metamorphosis I*. It suggests that not everything that first appears to be destruction must be so. It can be a change of the shape, for example as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. In *The Shape of Trouble to Come* the metamorphosis is staged through the stories of the different generations of Camille, a future butterfly-human. This refers to the story that Haraway fabulated in the last chapter of *Staying with the Trouble*. This chapter is entitled “The Camille Stories: Children of Compost.”<sup>43</sup> More and more, Camille, embodied by Sandra Hüller, transforms into a hybrid, symbiotic being. In Haraway’s story, these children of the compost even have monarch butterfly organs implanted in order to better adapt to the environment. This speculative fabulation is a call for a new way of thinking—individually and socially, politically, ecologically, and aesthetically. It draws attention to the fact that challenges are coming to the earth that make metamorphoses indispensable. Such metamorphoses should affect all aspects of human, non-human, and more-than-human life and pose again the question: How can we rethink the relationships of humans with plants, with animals, and with the technological and ecological environment? This new way of thinking is a relational way of thinking, which Haraway calls “thinking-with,” a way of living-with, being aware of troubling relations and any significant otherness that transforms those involved in such relations and the worlds we live in. However, in *The Shape of Trouble to Come* this attempt at thinking-with remains playful: it is an attempt to represent something that cannot be represented. It remains unfinished, provisional, in a “not-yet” status that cannot be completed, a project that is doomed to failure. The FARN. collective also addresses this fact in an open dialogue on stage. Nevertheless, telling and thinking with Haraway’s fabulation on stage leads to an experience of becoming and of being vulnerable to others as the FARN. collective also states: “Trying is the most comforting thing we have.”

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<sup>42</sup> Preciado, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 132–168.

## Thinking with Care

Referring to feminist ethics of care, María Puig de la Bellacasa argues in *Matters of Care* that “to value care is to recognize the inevitable interdependency essential to the existence of reliant and vulnerable beings.”<sup>44</sup> Care is “a manifold range of doings needed to create, hold together, and sustain life and continue its diverseness.”<sup>45</sup> This means that with “an understanding of human agencies as immersed in worlds made of heterogeneous but interdependent forms and processes of life and matter, to or not to care about/for something/somebody inevitably does and undoes relation.”<sup>46</sup> Conceptualizing care as “a critically disruptive doing that can open to ‘as well as possible’ reconfigurations engaged with troubled presents,”<sup>47</sup> it also allows the acknowledgment of new forms of commonality beyond distinction, subjugation, and alienation. The notion of *doing* refers to something that the word *concerns* lacks. Puig de la Bellacasa indicates that both words, concern and care, come from the Latin word *cura*, but express different qualities: “I am concerned” denotes worry and thoughtfulness about an issue as well as, though not necessarily, the fact of belonging to the collective of those concerned, “affected” by it; “I care,” for instance, rather adds a strong sense of attachment and commitment to something. Also, *to care* is more binding than just being concerned, it requires active involvement and has stronger affective and ethical connotations.<sup>48</sup> To explore the significance and the ethics dimension of care, Puig de la Bellacasa frames the idea of care as a situated and committed form of speculation—or: “as a speculative affective mode that encourages intervention in what things could be”<sup>49</sup>—that simultaneously works to sustain the world we live in and opens it up to new political alliances. For Puig de la Bellacasa, “thinking with care” offers a way to think through and beyond more-than-human entanglements. In particular, to make silent voices—those of more-than-human actors—heard, she advocates “thinking with care” as “an active process of intervening in the count of whom and what is ratified as concerned.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 70.

<sup>46</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 66.

<sup>50</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, 52.



Bernard Stiegler proposes another concept of thinking that is also linked to care. The philosopher remarks in his book *The Neganthropocene*, that it is necessary to ask under what conditions speculative stories of living together can be told in today's era of the anthropocene.<sup>51</sup> As Stiegler argues, the Anthropocene results from the domination of modern technology on the earth through an industrialization that is currently unfolding as a process of generalized, digital automation. This process tends to eliminate reflection and blocks any genuine questioning of its own development, producing a state of generalized entropy at all levels—ecological, economic, psychic, social, and, in particular, noetic or thinking.<sup>52</sup> So how can we think new forms of life today in the entropocene era when thinking is conditioned by the toxicity of current digital technologies? Stiegler argues that the possibility of thinking and questioning should be understood as a pharmacological situation that calls for a therapeutic reversal.<sup>53</sup> He remarks that “to think would therefore be to take care, to care for, which is also to say, to act, to do, to make—(the) *différance*: it would always be to think the wound.”<sup>54</sup> He interprets the wound as “*hubris, delinquere*, the violence (*Gewalt*) of the necessary default,” which is also “a disease, an *affection*, and this affect can also become infected.”<sup>55</sup> The so-called *panseurs* are needed to “dress, treat, care for and heal this wound.”<sup>56</sup> Stiegler remarks that the word *panseur* is linked to the French word *penser*, which means *to think* and was used in the fifteenth century by those who took care of horses. After 1623 the term transitioned to medical practice.<sup>57</sup> Panseurs are therefore those who feed the animal or give the human being medical attention. Stiegler states: “*To think* would always be *to exert therapeutic activity: hubris*, which as we will see Heidegger names both violence (*Gewalt*) and in-quietude (*Unheimlichkeit*, uncanniness), is what, as the *excessiveness of exosomatization*, generates *pharmaka* that *require panseurs*. This requirement, this request, this ‘demand,’ this ‘call,’ *requires* a vocation—*fordern*.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Stiegler, *Neganthropocene*, 38–39, 45, 51–52.

<sup>52</sup> Stiegler.

<sup>53</sup> Stiegler, 34, 36, 63, 209, 228.

<sup>54</sup> Stiegler, 215.

<sup>55</sup> Stiegler, 215.

<sup>56</sup> Stiegler, 215.

<sup>57</sup> Stiegler, 215.

<sup>58</sup> Stiegler, 215, emphasis in original.



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Stiegler sees in generating *pharmaka* a potentiality to reconfigure the thinking itself. He argues: “A new *pharmakon* carries new possibilities of psychic and collective individuation, and it thus requires ‘therapeutic’ prescriptions—in the form of magic, then religion, then politics—therapeutic prescriptions that constitute practices of care (sacrifice, ritual, worship, deliberation and debate), practices configured by the social systems within which attentional forms emerge.”<sup>59</sup> From this point of view, in *The Shape of Trouble to Come* lies a productive perspective focusing on the posthuman practices of care introduced by the FARN. collective. Especially, the ritual is, as Stiegler remarks, a practice of care that is “configured by the social systems within which attentional forms

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<sup>59</sup> Stiegler, 34.

emerge.”<sup>60</sup> These practices have a performative effect in enabling new ways of thinking with more-than-human others and perceiving that a paradigm of separation has been obscured. And this is afforded because thinking in and out of relations means not presupposing separations between more-than-human beings, but rather assuming existential, historically evolved connections which are found in these social systems.

## The Pharmakon

One significant scene that the FARN. collective creates in their play *The Shape of Trouble to Come* is situated in the scenario that Tsing calls the ruins of capitalism. The scene also refers to the ritual experiment during the research phase, in which the practice of composting was used to focus on what is hidden in the soil. On the theatre stage, heaps of soil pile up. Old computer cases from the 1990s stick out. The scenery is reminiscent of an electronic scrapyard. Sounds produced by electronic devices can be heard. Five members of the collective begin to dig in the soil and fill their bags, pockets, and baskets with it. They become collectors (Le Guin) but also compostists (Haraway). Then, they pour the earth all over the stage area. One by one they dig up computer components, electronic plastic toys, and such other haptic technologies as car wheels. All these things can be described as electronic waste in a landfill, carelessly thrown away by a society that lives in abundance. In this heap of soil, they find the remains of things that were once needed and necessary for humans, but that have been replaced after a few years by more modern, newer, more luxurious ones. It is the electronic waste of a capitalist age that is presented in this heap of soil. It is the kind of waste that is characterized by technologies and an incessant production that have left and are still leaving deep wounds in the ecological system of the world. For the performers, this significant scene of decline is not the end, it is the starting point from which they ask how to deal with these wounds and how they can negotiate future forms of living together. As I will explain later on, one can argue with Stiegler that they are creating a *pharmakon*, in which “panseurs” are needed. This also leads to the consideration that being attentive to precarious worlds and responding to them means remaining restless, being sensitive, and allocating responsibility for these polyphonic assemblages.

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<sup>60</sup> Stiegler, 34.

Through the ceremonial act of the FARN. collective, what appears to be waste at first sight becomes a mysterious cosmos of knowledge. By holding things up, presenting them to the audience, and placing them on a kind of an altar, the collectors, compostists, and panseurs—depending on the theoretical perspective—draw the spectator’s attention to the remains, asking them to assign a meaning and thus a story to the things—or in other words, asking them to listen to the things. It is about an experience that can only be understood in terms of its situation—that is, in the relationship between the way it is positioned in the scene and the status of the thing as rubbish. All these remains tell stories, are animated by past lives, and have a certain functionality which the audience can still recognize. The practice of gathering the soil in bags, pockets, and containers or collecting things is in itself a form of ritual and reminds of the practice of composting, which was described earlier. Gathering and collecting are closely linked to the act of coming together and sharing, and thereby the performed posthuman practices of care are also creating a new awareness of commonality and can be experienced as a therapeutic activity. The musicians Moritz Bossmann and Sandro Tajouri walk around once with a device which looks like a mine detector, but is simultaneously a noise collector, as if they were tracing the new connections and relationalities between human and the hidden remains in the soil. The quasi-ritualistic scene not only raises many questions about contemporary environmental problems, but also asks how to take care of the inherently destroyed world. By collecting the discarded electronic devices and piling them up on and next to the piano, which thus becomes an altar, the panseurs create a pharmakon which allows to see themselves as part of a larger ecological context: they gather a collection of seemingly carelessly discarded references to life. But also, there is a shift: Soil is no longer perceived as a resource but receives a status as a living world with its own stories. It is not the dystopian image of a destroyed world that remains, because the panseurs start a performative act of tidying up and rearranging the things which shows that there may be hope: hope for life coming back to a destroyed world; hope of healing the wounds experienced by the earth and its more-than-human residents.

### Co-Existence with “Friends”

The change in perspective from the destroyed, dystopian world to a relational world of hope is also made clear in the following scene. While the collectors, compostists, and panseurs plough up the earth, one of the actors quotes an

excerpt from Heiner Müller's poem "Ahnenbrühe" ("Ancestral Broth")<sup>61</sup> written in 1992. The poem confronts again an anthropocentric perspective: The relationship between human and landscape is rethought from a point of view that places the landscape in a position of agency. Müller unleashes in his poem the landscape by letting it act. The landscape is not simply created by humans, but acts on human beings through various metabolic processes. Quoting Heiner Müller, the lines spoken by Christoph Müller sound like the description of a hubris. He says:

God is no man no woman is a virus  
 A disease which you meekly get used to  
 In the flesh underground  
   In the coughing of bronchitis  
 The voice of the Last Judgement  
   In Der SPIEGEL's reportage  
 About the world's growing problem  
 With the disposal of the leaking remains  
 Referred to as FLOWER FERTILIZER in romantic poetry

and

ANCESTRAL BROTH of today's gravediggers  
 Contaminated by drugs polluted by progress  
 Dead we devastate OUR environment SURROUNDINGS  
 What a word WE ARE THE RADIATING CENTRE.<sup>62</sup>

The language alone is evidence of an enormous violence, when an explicit reference is made to the disease. It is a description of the Anthropocene, that, in the face of the earth and the waste on the stage, draws attention to the activity of the performers. Similarly to Stiegler, who insists that humans should not resign in the face of destruction, the FARN. collective also shows with their practices of care that there is a way to an alternative encounter with the seemingly hopeless situation. By singing the song *S.O.S.*, written by the musicians Mark Pritchard and The Space Lady, Sandra Hüller and Christoph Müller not only ask for help from their fellow human beings, but from "friends in all dimensions." The song starts with the following lines:

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<sup>61</sup> Heiner Müller, "Ancestral Broth," in *Waiting on the Opposite Stage: Collected Poems*, trans. James Reidel (London: Seagull Books, 2021), 302.

<sup>62</sup> Müller, "Ancestral Broth," 302.

Oh, friends in all dimensions  
 Can you hear our heartfelt plea?  
 We'd wrecked our tiny vessel  
 And will soon be lost at sea.

The song indicates that humans are not solely responsible for the earth, but there is a co-existence with “friends,” interpreted as possible allied beings in other dimensions. In this way, the panseurs once again shift the audience’s attention to an entanglement that includes all forms of being that we cannot yet notice, of possible symbionts, such as the cyborg-butterfly Camille, critters, plants, or even rocks.

The observed transformation and interconnection in this soil-human-relation are two crucial factors embedded in the metaphor of the panseur, but also in the practice of thinking-with. It helps in shifting our attention to a “response-ability,” towards the entanglements of human and more-than-human relationships. The “response-ability” is reflected in the various posthuman practices of care. The resulting redefinition of the relationship between the landscape, the infected wound, the panseurs, and the audience could also be described using Karen Barad’s term “intra-action.”<sup>63</sup> Unlike the concept of interaction, intra-action according to Barad does not presuppose the existence of two separate entities that then enter into a relationship with each other. It is only through reciprocal intra-actions between performer or observer and a phenomenon that the references, boundaries, and properties of phenomena, their materiality and their meaning are established, the references and boundaries of phenomena, their materiality as well as their meaning, are constituted, stabilized, and destabilized at the same time.<sup>64</sup> In creating a polyphonic assemblage in this posthuman ritual, a condition of the world is tentatively designed that does not start from a dead and destroyed world, but from healing the earth and living on, focusing on the entanglement with all posthuman forms of living.

## The Arts of Noticing

Following Stiegler’s argument that thinking is a form of caring, a tool for orientation and deliberation, the question arises, how technological developments

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<sup>63</sup> See Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003), 815, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

<sup>64</sup> Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 801–808.

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can help us reveal other forms of attention. The transformation of Camille that follows the ceremonial act is not only narrated, but performed by Sandra Hüller who is dressed in a white costume with wings, decorative elements, natural forms such as a net and gossamer, and technical aids. Sandra Hüller films the action on the stage herself with a mobile phone camera while telling Camille's story. The recording is projected live onto a large screen above the stage. When telling this story, the actress leaves the stage but continues to film herself. Her transformation can be watched while the remaining three performers plough the earth on stage and draw circles in it. The screen draws the attention away from the ritualistic actions performed on the stage to technical elements: There are illuminated boards on the stage with the slogan "Hey Critter" and signs in many different languages. On the large screen and six smaller computer screens from the 1990s a mix of thousands of footage images can be seen, referring to advertisements, rubbish, slime, architecture, close-ups of textiles, ice-cream bars, soft toys, cans with Orange Smoke Bomb stickers, and cactus pots—remnants of capitalism, so to speak. The remains of the world we live in is shown in a different form than the panseurs have presented with the electronic devices. The remains are represented as images, on the screen, and with the addition of



disturbing noises, creates the effect of sensory overload. Christoph Müller, the actor who took care of the plants at the beginning, stands there with a computer case in his hand and silently looks up at the screen. At some point everything turns white because the images flicker quickly. Then he sits down and starts singing *I Want to Know What Love Is* by the British rock band Foreigner. Again, the question is how to respond to all the possibilities that technology offers if, in the end, they do not help us heal the wounds. How to be touched? How to inter-act? The only answer seems to be love and care for the others as well as being vulnerable, so others can receive care.

The FARN. collective, however, does not propose any particular solution to these questions, but rather initiates an open discussion. In doing so, they raise various questions in relation to the quoted texts they use in the presented scenes: What does it actually mean to think? What does it actually mean to understand? What is language? What is care? And what does it mean to engage with (techno) animals, plants, and even stones, soil, and electronic devices? How do the modalities of different practices of care inflect our way of knowing? Do we really need to develop new techniques that educate us in the arts of noticing? Or do we perhaps already have the technology but not care enough about it? The FARN. collective demand that we ask ourselves how critters communicate with each other and how we listen to them. And there is also a demand to learn to overcome the alienation that obviates living-space entanglements. Each assemblage the FARN. collective created in the production has its own melodies and rhythms which intertwine. These melodies and rhythms challenge the notion of unity of progress with a pluriversity of voices and trajectories, through harmony and dissonance, in the assemblage of a coming together. Also, the idea of the scene—whether on the theatre stage or as a scene of thought—avoids an universal application. It emphasizes the partiality of perspective and enables a shift from disciplinary knowledge to situated knowledges: It is about a doing and undoing, a worlding and unworlding, a learning and unlearning that leads to a new sense of communality. The fact that in the last scene all performers—or panseurs—sit around a fire and listen to the stories of ants, to the lyrics of lichen, and to the poetry of rocks maybe speaks for itself. The attempt to focus on the “arts of noticing” leads to a thinking in relationalities. The concluding point is therefore to explore the boundaries of ways of thinking and traditions of thought in these scenes of an experimental set-up and transformative practices of care and, in doing so, to implicitly ask again and again how thinking is based on relationality.





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