

RESEARCH ESSAY

# You are Variations

Scoring Working Methods, Sounding Water's Cycles, Listening to Trees

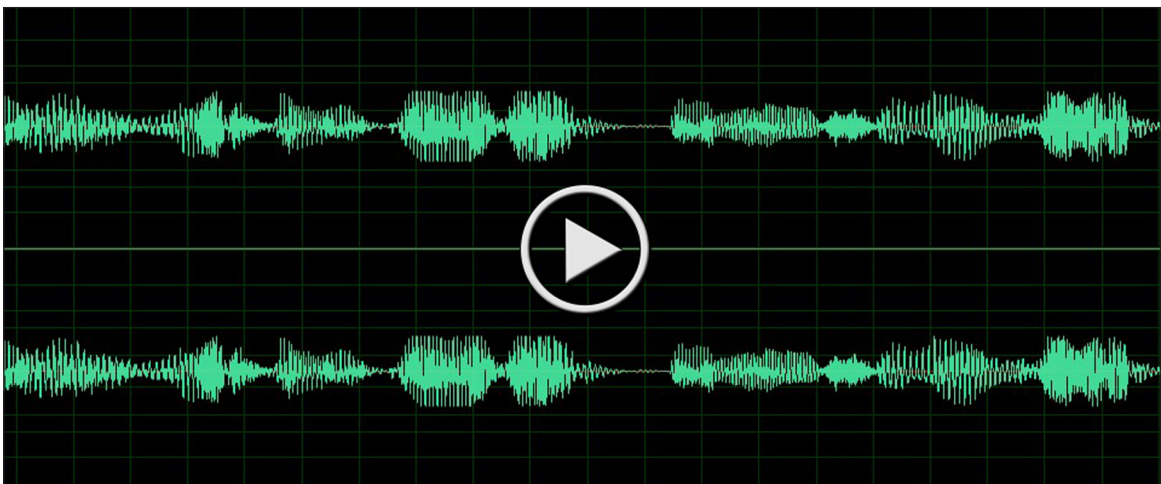
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Please start by listening to two documentary extracts from: 'you are variations,' version 04/02, Oct. 2014, and 'you are variations,' version 04/03, Sept. 2015<sup>1</sup>



**Audio 1:** yav, 04/02, 2014; spring (extract from early morning), 03:34 min, audio-video documentation.



**Audio 2:** yav, 04/02, 2014; summer (extract from midday), 01:29, audio-video documentation.

<sup>1</sup> "... all things express other things,  
as well as the world itself ...  
all things somehow perceive ... all things conspire and consent ... all things behave ... like us.. the flowing water weaves the rich  
branches of fluvial trees ..."  
Michel Serres, *Matter and Information*, in 'grane vapor ray', HKW, 2014

You just listened to 'you are variations, version 04/02', October 2014 – two documentary extracts from 'spring' and 'summer' – probably without any background information. At the end of this essay I would like to ask you to listen to two further extracts from 'you are variations,' this time from the documentation of 'version 04/03,' September 2015 – 'autumn' and 'winter.' You then will listen with some background information on the piece, which probably will change your listening experience.

The project 'you are variations' is an open series of events reading, as if it were a music score, eco-physiological, long-term monitoring data on the life of trees. It activates the score through meetings, performance, and thought into events of sensory experience.<sup>2</sup> The research project encompasses interpretation, translation, and arrangement of measurements of tree activity into compositions.<sup>3</sup> The resulting performances are re-creations of the tree as a sonic performative event. To me it means: creating (the conditions for) an attitude that allows me to perceive myself *together (with . . .)*.<sup>4</sup> It is in this sense that the project calls for a common querying across and amongst disciplines in our ways of *being with ourselves and the world*.

The project is a direct result of the collaboration with the Institute for Forest, Snow, and Landscape Research WSL (Zürich), where the climate data I am working with come from. I was invited as an 'artist in lab' in 2011 to study eco-physiological processes within trees (i.e. scientific procedures), and creative processes within me (experiments that might lead to aesthetic proceedings). We have been working together intensively since then.<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to link *the scientific and the aesthetic*,<sup>6</sup> the project seeks to make data tangible, address their intangibility, and experiment with different modes of re-connecting data to what they are based on.<sup>7</sup> In its focus on *linking*, the project draws a wide arch: does the mutual exclusion or the deliberate attempt to include scientific *and* aesthetic forms of encoded, embodied, and embedded knowledge<sup>8</sup> change our experience and engagement with creation? Could the interplay and collaborations between scientific and

<sup>2</sup> It especially examines the idea of listening as a political act: How can we incite receptivity? An open responsiveness understood as activity: How can we listen with agency and intent to the environment? For example: Can we imagine developing a form of listening sensitive to what is left out? When listening we do not see, but hear. It is a movement towards the inside. Can we develop a vision for listening and hearing as tangible and real?

<sup>3</sup> The ongoing series of events so far has produced 4 books, 7 performances, 3 sound installations, 3 video installations, and 1 light installation:

version 01/01 Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) ~ 80 year LWF plot Visp/Salgesch, Vallais, CH presented at WSL, Zürich, CH; Dec. 2011

version 01/02 Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) ~80 year LWF plot Visp/Salgesch, Vallais, CH presented at Sosta, Leuk, VS, CH; May 1 2015

version 01/03 Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) ~80 year LWF plot Visp/Salgesch, Vallais, CH presented at *Jazz Festival Montreux, CH; July 18 2015*

version 01/04 Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) ~80 year LWF plot Visp/Salgesch, Vallais, CH to be presented at *Ferme d'Asile, Sion, CH; Oct. 30 2015*

version 02/01 Silver fir (*Abies alba*) ~ 110 year LWF plot Vordemwald, Aargau, CH presented at WSL, Zürich, CH; Dec. 2011

version 03/01 European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ~ 160 year LWF plot Neunkirch, Schaffhausen presented at *Museum zu Allerheiligen, SH, CH; March 2013*

version 04/01 European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ~170 year LWF plot Lausanne, Vaud, CH presented at *Jazz Festival Montreux, CH; July 18 2013*

version 04/02 European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ~ 170 year LWF plot Lausanne, Vaud, CH presented at *Vondelkerk, Amsterdam, NL; Oct. 18 2014*

version 04/03 European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ~ 170 year LWF plot Lausanne, Vaud, CH *rehearsals presented at Forecast, Haus der Kulturen der Welt; Aug. 29 – 30 2015*

version 04/03 European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) ~ 170 year LWF plot Lausanne, Vaud, CH presented at *Bird's Eye, Basel, CH; Sept. 20 2015*

<sup>4</sup> There are first person world views (speaking in the first person: 'I'); and there are third person world views (speaking in the third person: 'it'); what if we bridge them with (the use of) second person world views (speaking in the second person: 'you'): a sort of "con-science."

<sup>5</sup> Up to now we have been working with a selection of the following parameters measured by the LWF project of the WSL in ZH, CH: *atmospheric deposition (1996-today), composition of ground vegetation (1994-today), crown condition (1995-today), tree-diameter and -height (2000-today), EC-5 soil water content (2010-today), leaf chemistry (1997-today), leaf area index (1996-today), lichens (2003-today), litterfall (1996-today), manual circumference band (2001-today), soil matrix water potential (1996-today), meteorological parameters (1996-today), ozone symptoms (2002-today), ozone concentration (2000-today), passive sampling of NH3 & NO2 (1999-2000), soil matrix chemistry (1994-today), soil morphology (1994-today), soil solution chemistry (1999-today), tree cores (1998), crown transparency (1995-today), deadwood sampling (2009), point dendrometer (2011-today).*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. [http://www.wsl.ch/index\\_EN](http://www.wsl.ch/index_EN), [www.wsl.ch/info/organisation/wsl\\_arbeitsumfeld/Artist\\_in\\_Lab/CdG/index\\_DE](http://www.wsl.ch/info/organisation/wsl_arbeitsumfeld/Artist_in_Lab/CdG/index_DE); [www.dg-c.org](http://www.dg-c.org)

<sup>7</sup> Working across disciplines might also encompass a rethinking of the processes of not only what we actually learn, but how we learn.

<sup>8</sup> The project also stresses the fact that 'data' are not events or objects but always records or descriptions or memories of events or objects. There is always a transformation or recoding of the raw event which mediates and intervenes between the scientist and his/her object. Moreover, always and inevitably, there is a selection of data used because the total universe is not subject to



**Figure 1:** You are variations, installation HKW Berlin, 2015. Credits: Marcus Lieberenz.

aesthetic forms of knowledge transform our understanding of creation, ultimately leading to new modes of relating to ourselves and the environment, thereby generating a different world?<sup>9</sup>

observation from any given observer's position. In a strict sense, therefore, no data are truly 'raw,' and every record has been somehow subjected to editing and transformation by man and/or instrument.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bronislaw Szerszynski in 'Anthropocene Campus | Disciplinarity, in Nov. 2014: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=20YZvxQMBrg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20YZvxQMBrg)

The questions above are formulated in a somewhat modest way: *could* it be possible, is it likely, is it able, is it permitted? One could also ask: *what if* a profound inclusion, a thorough integration, and an intense interaction of scientific and aesthetic forms of knowledge transform our experience and engagement with creation, leading to new modes of relating to ourselves and the environment? These considerations underscore the need to include both the scientific *and* the aesthetic: the project 'you are variations' plays with scientific *and* aesthetic methods expanding them into an ongoing series of events evoking questions about the validity of categorical binaries such as nature and culture, subject and object, and science and art known from Cartesian dualism and scientific materialism.

Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) might help in understanding these questions further. Whitehead considered reality an abstraction, i.e. in his view reality as such is only accountable for a certain realm of reality. Consequently, both matter and nature are concepts he problematizes. Whitehead argues that modern thought, in mistakenly understanding an abstract concept of nature as something concrete, is doomed to fit everything into a rigid scheme, thus constituting a rift, an opposition, between the concepts of nature and culture, subject and object, human and non-human. Therefore, Whitehead not only develops a different metaphysics, but also a different understanding of metaphysics altogether. Instead of nature in its Cartesian *deux-pièce* of mind and body, he proposes a way of looking at various levels simultaneously, a process he calls creation. To me, then, to speak of nature and culture, of subject and object, and of science and art is to speak about a system of creation.

I consider the project 'you are variations' or the score's universe the creation of a system manifesting itself in experience, i.e. the realm of events. Events embodying experience might be the very junction where science and art meet. An interface where – as I would like to suggest – especially artists, and maybe also scientists, dig and feel at home in the meticulous experimental research of experience's own generic nature.

The score as an act of organizing and arranging information is committed to 'enabling consequential meaning,' i.e. the composition as a construction constructing knowledge. The concept of knowledge is speculative acquiring meaning not only by a supposed capacity to mirror reality or to postulate any form of truth, but by way of generating 'consequential meanings'; generating a circular flow of energy and matter; generating reason and opportunity to come together to rehearse, play, and learn; generating events of meeting, relating, and exchange. Similar to how an artwork functions, Whitehead's 'view from nowhere' transforms



**Figure 2:** You are variations, rehearsal, HKW Berlin, 2015. Credits: Marcus Lieberenz.



**Figure 3:** You are variations, rehearsal, HKW Berlin, 2015. Credits: Marcus Lieberenz.

and thereby *creates* meaning; a meaning continuously on the move together with all its collective histories and diverse senses of knowing.

Let us try to give such meaning a name, just for now, as a sketchy, temporary description. Let's call it 'con-science.' Could 'con-science' become a form of *intense knowledge*, with amazement, curiosity, and experiment as its siblings and experience as the actual body by and through which the event (of 'con-knowing') appears? Or put differently: could we sensitize ourselves to the world? Could we open ourselves to new connections? What is necessary for such a meeting? Being primate, being mammal, being animal, being life form, being energy? Attempting of becoming 'other'? Or conversely, *relating* to 'other'? And if so, could we learn to relate? Could I relate to you, for example? Here language is understood as voice; here the words and sentences become voice: a voice with grain, and tone, and inflection; a voice that pauses and repeats itself; a voice with a sliding relationship between the eye and the ear.

By intently listening to that voice – as well and as much as to trees – 'you are variations' is suggesting an ambient *poetics of politics* operating as concrete, experimental collaborations, exploring urgent quantitative topics of scale, temporality, and relevance; as well as questions concerning the quality – such as complexity, proximity, and intensity – of our relation to trees and ourselves. In order to expand on the query, we are working together at the Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research with a variety of trees, a cross-disciplinary group of agents, a hybrid set of methods and materials, and an open box of tools, to explore in-depth how to connect different ways of framing, perceiving, conceiving, meeting, engaging with, relating to, co-existing and living with trees *and* ourselves.

The project 'you are variations' takes place against the backdrop of concerns over the observable trends in climatic change and the related known and unknown modifications, both on a planetary level as well as within our own microclimates.<sup>10</sup> It may be a hot topic for the media, while it actually is a most intricate subject matter: 'you are variations' draws attention to the complex water cycling and sophisticated energy balance of trees under different and changing environmental conditions. Its queries are relevant for contemporary regimes of scientific knowledge, especially those concerned with climate futures – cycles in planetary

<sup>10</sup> If we look at the world as a verb, or as a gerund in the present tense, it matters which ideas we think others with (thinking with, relating, becoming with). In this sense and in the same way, we also ask: How do, and how can, *ideas* interact?

metabolic processes – as well as for queries regarding art’s capacity to cultivate a set of environmental dispositions that cause a break for thought, and at the same time might touch and move us for the sake of all human and non-human others we would like to live together and become intimate with.

The contribution of ‘you are variations’ may lie in its own call and commitment to multiple and hybrid practices and investigations into diverse – hidden, existing, possible, and potential – relations. In this sense, ‘you are variations’ is a gesture that invites other gestures, an invitation to the inventive in translation, and a call that calls for(th) events of relating.

Please listen to two documentary extracts from: ‘you are variations’, version 04/02, Oct. 2014, and ‘you are variations’, version 04/03, Sept. 2015



**Audio 3:** yav, 04/03, 2015; autumn (extract from evening), 00:48 min, audio-video documentation.



**Audio 4:** yav, 04/03, 2015; winter (extract from night), 02:45, audio-video documentation.

you can simultaneously recite the following passage from the authors diary:

*“ . . . you must hold the tree in your eye like a child holding a stick:  
it grips it so firmly that one marvels at the strength of the tiny fist.  
And when it lets the stick go, there is not the slightest jerk.  
Completely unselfconsciously, aimless, and without purpose,  
it turns from the one to the other, and at the first instance  
we probably would say that the child is playing with the tree,  
were it not equally true that the tree is playing with the child.”*


### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

**How to cite this article:** Giustina, C D 2016 You are Variations. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 1(1): 5, pp. 1–7, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.5>

**Published:** 15 January 2016

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