

The Enabling Materialities of the Charcoal Suit

A Study of the Politicizing Capacities of Hanna Saarikoski's Performance C

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the artist Hanna Saarikoski's performance *C* and the charcoal suit that becomes a co-performer in this work. The title of the performance, *C*, is a symbol for the chemical element carbon, which relates to 1) the main material of the suit, carbonized willow branches, and 2) the human ecological impact on the planet, often called the "carbon footprint". In this performance, Saarikoski walked through the heart of the city of Turku wearing a bulky black suit, laden with more than one thousand charcoal sticks. I argue that performance *C* addresses the human-induced environmental emergency by sensually politicizing it and that the charcoal suit actively contributes to this politicizing process by generating sounds, interacting with the surroundings, and thus enabling surprising encounters. In this article, approaching the topic from the perspectives of new materialism, political performance art, and costume studies, I will analyze the ways in which the charcoal suit works as a co-performer and thus contributes to politicizing the human impact on the environment.

KEYWORDS

performance art, political performance, costume agency, charcoal suit, non-human, more-than-human, Anthropocene

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Figure 1. Hanna Saarikoski, Performance C, 21.9.2018, the charcoal suit: 180 × 75 × 40 cm, photograph by Jussi Virkkumaa © Hanna Saarikoski and Jussi Virkkumaa, Turku, Finland.

Introduction

Hanna Saarikoski (b. 1979), the Finnish artist, gave a durational performance titled *C* twice at the New Performance Festival, held from September 21 to 23, 2018, in Turku, Finland.¹ In both versions of the performance, Saarikoski wore a costume that consisted of more than one thousand artists' charcoal pieces attached to a jumpsuit (Fig. 1).² The charcoal suit is key to the title of the performance, *C*, which symbolizes the chemical element carbon. This reference materially and thematically connects with, first, the artists' charcoal made of a carbonized willow branch and, second, the human planetary ecological footprint that encompasses carbon emissions and causes deforestation, for example.³ I claim that by way of its materiality, performance *C* offered surprising and, hence, interruptive encounters for festival participants and random passersby and, in doing so, tangibly politicized the devastating impact that humans have on the Earth's environment.

In this study, the politicizing capacities are attributed to the non-human material agency that is involved in works of art. I suggest that the non-human agency can create a political influence, for example, in terms of advancing awareness of environmental issues. Such an understanding of political influence arguably complicates and challenges the notion of the political actor that has been conventionally granted only to human agents.⁴ In her influential book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, political thinker Jane Bennett questions the ontological differences between human and non-human agencies and criticizes the understanding of the latter as mute and devoid of the capacity to affect. Instead, she argues that non-human agencies, for example, "dead rats, bottle caps, gadgets, fire, electricity, berries, and metal," bear affective politicizing capacities for transforming worldly states of affairs and related public opinion.⁵

Similar to Bennett's criticism, performance artists have challenged the narrow and anthropocentric understanding of agency by co-performing with non-human agencies, such as with costume-related material agencies that are particularly relevant to this article.⁶ For example, in Teresa Murak's *Procession* (1974) the involved costume comprises cress seeds,⁷ while Nick Cave's *Soundsuits* (1992–) includes twigs, textiles, feathers, buttons, found objects, and so on.⁸ In Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta's *The Algae Opera* (2012–2015), a singer co-performs with algae, a photosynthetic plant-like organism,⁹ whereas Liz McGowan's *Cloaks* (2022) involves a costume that consists of blanket weed, reedbed, recycled plastic, and tangles of the artist's hair.¹⁰ Today, there is a mounting debate and growing agreement on the importance of involving non-human agencies in contemporary art and performance when contesting the anthropocentric understandings of the world.¹¹ This is because non-human agencies often have the ability to puzzle and surprise humans in unfolding events, as they are not fully dependent on human aims and intentions. Indeed, a non-human agent, as Bennett suggests, "sometimes chooses its path on the spot, in response to the other bodies it

1 A short video documentation of performance *C* including the sounds of the charcoal suit can be accessed at Saarikoski, Hanna. *C*. 2018, At Manilla Courtyard. 21.9.2018.

2 Please see my article that focuses on the production process of the charcoal suit and a video work where the artist draws on white paper by wearing this suit. Türkmen 2023, 32–47.

3 This performance was a response to the New Performance Turku Festival call in 2018 on the themes of postcolonialism, posthumanism and postfeminism. New Performance Turku Festival 2018.

4 Human agency has been recognized as the only political actor in Western thinking since the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, such as in Plato's *Republic* (Plato 2012) and Aristotle's *Politics* (Aristotle 2012), and this influence has mostly been retained in political philosophy and political science until very recent times. See also, Barad 2003, 801–31; Latour 1999, 198, Bennett 2010, 94–110.

5 Bennett 2010, 107.

6 See also these related examples that include non-human agencies: Tuija Kokkonen's *A Performance with an Ocean View* (2006–ongoing) includes "the sun, clouds, wind, photosynthesis, a carbon atom, the dogs, ants, snakes, seagulls and so on", and Annette Arlander's *Performing with Trees* (2016–ongoing) comprises many types of trees, for example, pine, olive, alder, and many others. Kokkonen 2011, 11; Arlander 2022, 231–48.

7 Murak 1974.

8 Cave 1992.

9 Burton & Nitta 2012. See also for an analysis of "The Algae Opera", Tiainen 2019, 9–26.

10 McGowan 2022.

11 Kirkkopelto 2017, 87–96; Arlander 2020, 121–42; Toland et al. 2022, 127–35.

encounters and the surprising opportunities for actions and interactions that they afford.”¹² In this regard, non-human agencies can actively contribute to generating unexpected, surprising encounters to politicize a subject matter, for example, the anthropogenic (human) damages that cause severe ecological catastrophes.¹³

There is also a specific, growing interest in the crucial agency of costumes in the making, enacting, and experiencing performances. As prominent costume scholars Donatella Barbieri, Rachel Hann, Sofia Pantouvaki, and Peter McNeil point out, costume agencies enable performers to embody an idea, engage with a specific time and place, and establish an immediate relation with the audience.¹⁴ This implies that costumes can move with and guide the artist and, thus, vitally participate in forming the interactions with the surroundings that emerge during the performance. This imbrication between the performer and a costume agency suggests that the latter can be thought of as a co-performer. To put it another way, a performance often emerges along with multiple materialities, including costume agencies, and these multiple agencies can make the work “more-than-human”. Aligned with this recent interest in the agency of costume, I address the ways in which the wearable agency of the charcoal suit in *C* works as a co-performer in creating surprise and unpredictability to exert a sensual effect with political implications. While embracing the agentic turn in costume studies, I use “suit” as the artist herself chooses the word “suit” when she refers to her work, and also the base material for the charcoal suit is just a simple high street jumpsuit—that gains new political agency in the performance *C*.

In making political interventions in and through performances, many established performance artists and theorists, such as Roselee Goldberg, Antony Howell, and Diana Taylor, recognize surprise and unpredictability as key performative elements since these enhance the emerging sensations of performance.¹⁵ Similarly, prominent scholars from theater and performance studies, for example, Josette Féral, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Cecilia Lagerström acknowledge that performances can offer strange and unusual encounters. Such encounters affect and shape the participants’ experience in a way that may evoke new, transformative sensibilities.¹⁶ The philosopher Jacques Rancière emphasizes a related aspect by suggesting that a performative action creates an interruptive event in order to re-distribute the prevailing sensibilities in the socio-political sphere.¹⁷

I would like to think of this surprising, unpredictable, and interruptive moment that a performance can produce as an autonomous event or, in Rancière’s words, as an autonomous experience.¹⁸ The unfolding process of performance or any aesthetic experience exceeds and multiplies the artists’ and participants’ anticipation, particularly when it involves non-human agencies.¹⁹ I claim that this interruptive and autonomous event can initiate a process of politicization or, to use Rancière’s terminology, create “dissensus,” which reconfigures what is visible and audible in the public sphere.²⁰ It should be noted that Rancière and Bennett agree on how a surprising, unpredictable event becomes a nucleus for initiating a political intervention. However, while Rancière puts emphasis on the human actor, Bennett expands

12 Bennett 2010, 27. Here Bennett acknowledges Bruno Latour’s emphasis on the actant and the surprise of event. Latour notes that “There is no object, no subject (...) But there are events. I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do.” See for more, Latour 1999, 281.

13 The term Anthropogenic refers to human-caused environmental disasters. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer have suggested the Anthropocene in order to frame this era that human impacts have accelerated and made irreversible effects, including ocean acidification, deforestation, and air pollution. See, Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, 17–18.

14 Barbieri 2017; Hann 2019; Pantouvaki & McNeil 2021; Pantouvaki et al. 2021.

15 Goldberg 2004, 30; Taylor 2016, 49; Howell 2002, 80.

16 Féral 1982, 174; Fischer-Lichte 2008, 178; Lagerström 2015, 71.

17 Rancière 2010.

18 Rancière 2010. On the topic of interruption of performances, see, for example, O’Sullivan 2006; Edkins & Kear 2013.

19 On the topic of the autonomous event, see for example, Fischer-Lichte 2008, 161–180; Manning 2016, 46–63; Kontturi 2018, 82–97.

20 Rancière 2010, 115–34. See also Deranty 2010; Tanke 2011, 73–110.

this politicizing agency to also include non-humans.²¹ In the course of this article, I revisit the notions of surprise and unpredictability to investigate their potential in the creation of an interruptive, autonomous event via non-human agencies of performance C.

My initial encounter with Saarikoski's charcoal suit was online, on the artist's and the New Performance Turku Festival's websites. The suit caught my attention because of its unusual appearance and its effect: the documentation of the performance made me think that the suit allured and surprised the attendees in the public space. As the mode of my initial encounters indicates, when the two versions of the performance took place, I was not there. In other words, I have no live, firsthand experience of the performance C. However, my online encounters triggered further investigation, and I began to collect diverse documentation materials on the project to better analyze this performance and make it more "alive" for myself. For example, I collected firsthand experience and thorough knowledge of the charcoal suit by interviewing the artist on the production process of the suit and by also examining it at the archive collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki. Moreover, I gathered twenty-five photographs from social media posts, documentation by three artist photographers, a short video recording (2:43 min), as well as social media comments and interviews with the artist and three audience members. I believe that this manifold material offers me sufficient information and evidence to analyze performance C from my chosen vantage point. I am well aware that the actual event of a performance has conventionally gained a higher ontological status over its documentation. However, contemporary performances are often approached from a broader perspective that can include, for example, various mediums of documentation, interviews, social media posts, comments, or even a live broadcast; hence, performances are addressed from the standpoint of the total accumulated ensemble of such fragments.²² Following the latter approach, I analyze performance C through the abovementioned diverse material.

The photographs have a central role in my analysis, and I include seven of them in this article. Because of privacy issues, I have blurred or pixelated the faces of the audience and passersby in six of the photographs—I have also sought permission from the photographers to do so.²³ However, all the photographs used here are openly available in their original form on the websites of the artist Hanna Saarikoski and the New Performance Turku. These photos can also be found on Instagram under the hashtags #hannasaarikoski, #c, #hilli, and #newperformanceturku.²⁴

Saarikoski performed C twice, on consecutive days, and the locations, durations, as well as types of audience encounters of these two performances differed significantly from each other. In the following, I discuss the two performances, both of which offer particular and distinctive experiences and engagements respectively. My discussion is divided into two sections that are dedicated to the specific ways in which each performance—particularly the charcoal suit—enables sensual, surprising, and interruptive encounters. The first section concentrates on the ways in which the charcoal suit contributes to the politicization of the anthropocentric impact on the earth's ecologies by making sounds and leaving traces in and around the Manilla Culture Factory, which is where the first performance took place. The second section focuses on the

21 Jane Bennett notes her discussion with Rancière as: "When [I - MT] asked in public whether he thought that an animal or a plant or a drug or a (nonlinguistic) sound could disrupt the police order, Rancière said no: he did not want to extend the concept of the political that far; nonhumans do not qualify as participants in a demos; the disruption effect must be accompanied by the desire to engage in reasoned discourse". Bennett 2010, 106.

22 Recently, an extensive debate has developed regarding how performance art should be studied: is first-hand experience always needed or is it sufficient to access it via documentation? The second view still implicitly confirms that live experience has a higher ontological status over its documentation (Auslander 2012). What is recently often embraced is that every fragment gathered from a performance should be counted as a part of the performance. For more on this discussion, see, for example, Jones & Stephenson 1999; Jones & Heathfield 2012; Niemelä 2016; Auslander 2018.

23 Regarding the privacy of people who appear in the photographs, I follow European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) recommendations and the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

24 Please visit Hanna Saarikoski's and New Performance Turku's websites to see the unblurred and unpixelated photos.

politicizing effects of the unexpected encounters that the suit and the performer made possible for the participants of the performance by walking through the heart of the city of Turku.

Encounter 1: Politicizing the Anthropocene

Hanna Saarikoski's first performance of *C* took place on 21 September 2018, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., at the Manilla Culture Factory. This cultural hub is located on the east side of Aura River, which runs through Turku, and consists of multiple studios for dancers, puppeteers, performance, and visual artists; it also includes three theater stages.²⁵ The first performance of *C* took place at the opening event of the 7th New Performance Turku Festival, and the artist performed the piece mostly in and around the courtyard of the factory.²⁶ The participants of this event probably had an initial idea of what the performer would look like, as performance *C* was featured on the cover of the festival booklet and program. Therefore, the appearance of the performer—the suit she hid in—worked as an inviting factor for many attendees.

The suit Saarikoski wore in this performance consists of over one thousand carbonized willow branches, which are the raw material of the artists' drawing-charcoal pieces (Fig. 1). The black charcoal sticks form a rough and wavy texture, giving the suit a vibrant effect. Together, each slightly creased charcoal piece that is attached to the suit comprises a thick, almost impenetrable, and condensed surface, and this vibrating texture renders the suit visually striking and haptically stimulating. The rough, piled-up charcoal pieces swing slightly when the performer moves, and this movement makes the pieces collide with each other. The colliding pieces generate clanking and rustling sounds that enhance the vibrancy of the suit. In my view, there is something non-human, almost monster-like, in the appearance of the performer, whose human characteristics are completely hidden under the bulky charcoal suit. This appearance and the charcoal material led me to think of the suit-wearing performer as a carbon 'monster' when I began examining this work.

Coinciding with my initial view, I came across an online news article that stated, "Bigfoot is a myth, but carbon bigfoot is real."²⁷ This reference to monstrosity in the article further encouraged me to approach performance *C* via an analogy between Bigfoot, which is the more-than-human character of North American mythology, and the human "carbon bigfoot," which leaves an irreversible mark on the Earth's ecosystems. A more accurate and scientific reference for the human "carbon bigfoot" is the idea of the Anthropocene that emphasizes the role of human actions in the current ecological and cultural crisis.²⁸ Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, et al., in their co-edited book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Monsters of Anthropocene*, argue that "monsters are useful figures with which to think the Anthropocene" and question the political reasons behind the massive human-caused transformations on the Earth.²⁹ Relatedly, I suggest that the *C*—or its charcoal 'monster' as an embodiment of the Anthropocene—invites us to think about our very own role in the ecological crisis. Since humans have become a geological force that has intensified unequal relations between differently situated humans and between humans and the environment, many scholars have begun questioning the political reasons underlying the anthropogenic impact.³⁰ Considering that politics is broadly understood as a contest among various kinds of power structures, (ill-established) values, and the (re) distribution of resources, human dominance over the environment inevitably includes political aspects.³¹

How does performance *C* thus politicize the human impact on the environment, and what

25 See, Manilla Culture Factory.

26 Saarikoski 13.12.2022.

27 An entry of an online news agency states that "Bigfoot is a myth. Climate change is real" to draw attention to the climate emergency. Scientist Robert Bindschadler and some volunteers have initiated an initiative and competition called "Taming Bigfoot" to help to reduce daily human carbon footprint. (Large 2018). The community has also created an app to follow and tame one's personal carbon footprint. I would like to thank Katve-Kaisa Kontturi for bringing this community to my attention. This app has helped me in taming my carbon Bigfoot too.

28 Crutzen & Stoermer 2000, 17–18.

29 Swanson et al. 2015, M2.

30 Haraway 2015, 159–65; Moore 2016; Hornborg 2016.

31 Rai et al. 2021, 4.

are the ways in which the charcoal suit contributes to this politicizing process? According to Rancière, politics entails a public where the relationship between its partakers (people) relies on so-called equality.³² Rancière asserts that this equality is falsely assumed and grants the rights and visibility only to those who maintain the order of the ill-constructed public.³³ Accordingly, for Rancière, a political act usually comes from those who are not considered partakers and who are, thus, not commonly visible in society. It is precisely because of this role of the outsider that the political act can function to interrupt the public order.

The interruptive moment is what Rancière calls “dissensus” (disruption/disagreement) that “re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time.”³⁴ Nonetheless, Rancière ultimately recognizes only humans as political actors because they have the privilege of speech. However, this understanding should be expanded to include non-humans that are capable of generating interruption in the socio-political order, thus contributing to making the invisible visible, and the inaudible audible. Here, new materialist political thinker Jane Bennett can help us to broaden the understanding of political agency. Bennett discusses Rancière’s notion of the political actor in detail and discerns an opportunity to include non-humans in generating political influences.³⁵ Bennett focuses on how a political act emerges and notices that “Rancière chooses to define what counts as political by what effect is generated: a political act not only disrupts, it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can see.”³⁶ In other words, Bennett aims to show how a transformative political act can also be initiated beyond the human intention and how non-humans are, too, capable of engendering political impact. She further explains in the following manner: “the political gate is opened enough for nonhumans... to slip through, for they also have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception: what was trash becomes things, what was an instrument becomes a participant, what was foodstuff becomes agent, what was adamantine becomes intensity. We see how an animal, plant, mineral, or artifact can sometimes catalyze a public... A vital materialist theory of democracy seeks to transform the divide between speaking subjects and mute objects into a set of differential tendencies and variable capacities.”³⁷

In performance and theater studies, the intention of the performing artists has been explored in multiple ways, and “the performer” is often considered as referring to the totality of the pieces, objects, and fragments of a performance.³⁸ For example, theater and performance scholar Josette Féral, in her paper “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified”, argues that a performer is an ensemble composed of bits of objects, flows of movements, and the combination of the entire surroundings that are both at the center and the margins of the performance.³⁹ Similarly, performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte, in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, emphasizes the “eventful” features of performances and suggests that this eventfulness includes multiple agents, such as “corporeality, spatiality, and tonality”, which all contribute to the emergence of the performance.⁴⁰ Following these views, the artist’s intentions can become plural with the involvement of non-human elements, and thus the latter, too, can partake in catalyzing a performance’s transformative intervention.

Embracing non-humans as catalyzers of “dissensual” acts can widen the spectrum of political discussions toward the more-than-human. Working with non-humans in a performance or acknowledging what makes a performance more-than-human can facilitate a reconfiguration of the ways in which we interact with the environment in and through performances. This

32 Rancière 2010, 29.

33 This inequality is an ontological status for politics, and what Rancière suggests is that the entire aim of the *political dissensus* is to make this inequality visible. For more, see Rancière 2010, 27–45.

34 Rancière 2010, 139.

35 Bennett 2010, 104–8.

36 Bennett 2010, 106.

37 Bennett 2010, 107.

38 For the discussion, see, for example, Féral 1982; Beeman 2002, 85-7; Carlson 2008, 9; McAuley 2010, 45.

39 Féral 1982, 177-179. See also Schechner 1988, 147.

40 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 162.

reconfiguration can occur, for example, when the non-human materialities of the performance come forward and take the lead to make our influence on the environment tangible to us. It is for this very reason that Hanna Saarikoski wears and performs with the charcoal suit, thereby arguably turning herself into a palpable embodiment of the Anthropocene: In her words, “I wanted to express my frustration silently about humans’ destructive actions toward the environment and draw attention to the related political reasons.”⁴¹

Reverberating the Anthropocene

I argue that the more-than-human performer of *C*—the artist and the charcoal suit—offers stimulating and “dissensual” encounters for performance participants just by standing still and “looking” at them in the courtyard of the Manilla (Fig. 2). This photograph shows how the performer postures before the participants and allows them to look at and inspect the charcoal “creature” from a near distance. It seems that this proximate interaction with the performer allured and amazed the participants, as their facial expressions suggest. One of them carries a booklet of the festival displaying performance *C* on the cover. The fact that the performance took place at the festival’s opening event: the participants hold their drinks while interacting with the performer in a relaxed atmosphere and appear to be open to what this encounter may generate. The artist Anthea Moys, who appears in this photograph to the left, described her encounter with the creature of *C* as “otherworldly.”⁴²



Figure 2. Hanna Saarikoski, Performance C, 21.9.2018, photograph by Jussi Virkkumaa © Hanna Saarikoski, Jussi Virkkumaa, the artists Leena Kela and Anthea Moys who appear in the photograph Turku, Finland.

41 Saarikoski 21.3.2021. Slightly modified by the author.

42 Moys 15.5.2023.

Interestingly, the charcoal suit does not imply or indicate any noticeable gender, race, or other easily recognizable (socio-culturally constructed) markers of identity. This probably encourages some participants to associate themselves with the charcoal “monster” and think of the performance in connection with the anthropogenic impact at a personal level.⁴³ A museum professional and one of the participants of the opening event, Annina Sirén, described her experience: “The charcoal suit made me think about how essential an element [carbon is] for life, and at the same time how problematic [it is] in the current ecological crisis... I contemplated how we all leave marks, but also how we cannot avoid affecting our surroundings and the environment we live in.”⁴⁴ This comment exemplifies how performance C made possible an experience of coming face to face with the carbon “monster”, i.e., an embodiment of the Anthropocene, thereby inspiring a feeling of identification with the human impact to which the “monster” refers.

Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing, et al. point out that “monsters are wonders” with which to think of “the massive human transformations of multispecies life and their uneven effects”.⁴⁵ How does the “speechless” monster, the charcoal suit, contribute to creating political influence as a co-performer? I suggest that co-performing with the charcoal suit in and around the Manilla courtyard invokes multisensorial experiences that can tangibly affect the participants. For example, when the performer walks, the colliding charcoal pieces, as described above, make jingling sounds. The suit also generates scratchy sounds, as some charcoal pieces scratch the ground (for the sounds see footnote 1) and leave light marks on the ground, as noticed by one participant Leena Kärkkäinen, a theater researcher.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the artist Moys described her sensory experience of the performance thus: “I remember the sounds, the rustling, and slow shifting and shuffling, and then also the wind blowing and the strands moving and rippling.”⁴⁷

In my view, the goosebump-raising, rustling, and scratchy sounds can encourage us to hear those ecological issues that are often inaudible and imperceptible in everyday life, as the video recording and the testimonies of the participants suggest. The charcoal suit (the co-performer) urges us to see and hear the human carbon footprint: it invites us to feel how our impact is inscribed onto the very skin of the Earth. The sounds of the suit thus reverberate as a politicizing element in the sense that they enable us to become palpably aware of our destructive impact.

The joint agency of the artist and the charcoal suit also provides an opportunity for a revelatory encounter: it sets a political “stage” on which the issue that still remains somewhat invisible in daily life, namely the Anthropocene, is framed and highlighted. This embodied revelation has the potential to reconfigure the manner in which we perceive and understand the human planetary footprint: a distanced metaphor takes a tangible, living form and becomes a felt experience. The charcoal suit actively participates in this revelatory encounter by co-performing and operating as an essential expository and affective element in this politicizing process. Costume scholar Donatella Barbieri describes the efficacy of wearable agencies in a performance in the following manner: “Artists who have deliberately wrought, sculpted, and wrestled with materials and material form upon or, rather, with the body realize that agency, and use that ability to change the wearer and the witness in a powerful experienced affective moment.”⁴⁸ Following Barbieri, what the performer and the charcoal suit co-offered by imbricating each other is a tangible, affective, and “dissensual” experience that may enhance a more profound understanding of the human impact on Earth.

I propose that the power of this interruptive, “dissensual” aesthetic experience arises from the autonomy of the event cast by the performer and the charcoal suit, in other words, by the

43 This, of course, does not mean that we all damage the environment to the same extent. For example, Donna Haraway asks who is the Anthropocene? “All of mankind? Well, who exactly? Fossil-fuel-burning humanity is the first short answer to that. Industrial humanity, however, is still a kind of a species-being; it doesn’t even speak to all of industrial humanity, but specifically the formations of global capital and global state socialisms.” Haraway 2015, 255–70.

44 Sirén 14.12.2022.

45 Swanson 2015, M2.

46 Kärkkäinen 12.12.2022.

47 Moys 15.5.2023.

48 Barbieri 2017, 139.

more-than-human. Rancière maintains that “the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but of a mode of experience.”⁴⁹ This might be particularly affective when non-human agencies partake in performance because they do not completely follow humans’ (artists’) intentions, as explained above. Thus, a performative experience can exceed and/or multiply the intention of the artist regarding the artwork, as well as the expectations of the participants.



Figure 3. Hanna Saarikoski, *Performance C*, 21.9.2018, photograph by Annina Sirén © Hanna Saarikoski and Annina Sirén, Manilla Theater entrance, Turku, Finland.

For example, when the more-than-human performer of *C* moves around the Manilla courtyard and steps into the Tehdas Theatre lobby (Fig. 3), the trajectory of the performer comprises multiple novel engagements with the surroundings that even the artist did not foresee. This open-ended process of unfolding enables a “dissensual”, autonomous event as it arises in the heat of the moment at a particular time and place. Saarikoski notes that when she walked into the theatre’s lobby, she noticed a guestbook there and lightly touched its white paper to leave some charcoal marks on it (Fig. 4).⁵⁰ This gesture of marking the guestbook was an improvised one: it was inspired by the emerging moments of the performance, thereby exceeding and

49 Rancière 2010, 116.

50 Saarikoski 13.12.2022.

multiplying the artist's intention regarding what the performance aimed to achieve at the outset. This marking registered the visit of an "embodied Anthropocene" in the theatre, as the charcoal suit enabled and guided the artist to record this event on a page of the guestbook and in the memory of the participants.



Figure 4. Hanna Saarikoski, Performance C, 21.9.2018, photograph by Julius Töyrylä © Hanna Saarikoski and Julius Töyrylä, Manilla Theater Lobby, Turku, Finland.

The instance just discussed, and numerous other moments from the first performance of *C*, can be considered "dissensual", autonomous events insofar as they instigate a new way of interaction with the surroundings and redistribute what is perceivable, visible, and audible. In this sense, I suggest that the artist and the charcoal suit—the co-performers of *C*—offered tangible and revelatory encounters and, thus, politicized the human carbon footprint by reverberating it in multisensorial ways.

Encounter 2: The Charcoal Suit as a Facilitator of Surprising Improvisations

Hanna Saarikoski wore the charcoal suit again on the second day of the festival (22 September 2018). This time, the performer's point of departure was near the Turku Cathedral Bridge, which is located in the historic heart of the city. She began from there at 2 p.m. and continued along the Aura Riverside toward the Manilla Culture Factory. The starting and ending points of the performance were decided beforehand and announced in the festival program. However, the exact trajectory of the route was not too rigid but remained open for improvisation by the performer. Saarikoski describes this in the following manner: "I had a kind of plan for the route, but it was not too strict. I was open to changing my plans... for example, the idea of taking the Föri [a cable ferry running across the Aura River] or walking across the bridges was very tempting, but since my walk was so slow, and the charcoal suit got painfully heavy after the first twenty minutes or so, I then decided to simply walk only one side of Aura River all the way."⁵¹

The pedestrian route between the Cathedral Bridge and the Manilla is relatively straight, and the distance between the two locations is approximately 2.2 kilometers. According to Google Maps, walking between the two points takes approximately thirty minutes, but the artist noted that "arriving at the Manilla took a little more than two hours."⁵² This is partially because of the fragility of the charcoal suit: the charcoal pieces can be easily broken when they collide with

51 Saarikoski 13.12.2022.

52 Saarikoski 13.12.2022.

each other while the performer moves. The artist needed to walk at a slow pace to keep the suit intact during the performance. On the other hand, the slowness enables to accentuate each unfolding moment of the performance.



Figure 5. Hanna Saarikoski, *Performance C*, 22.9.2018, photograph by Antti Laitinen © Hanna Saarikoski and Antti Laitinen, Turku, Finland.

Although the artist eventually decided to simply continue on the east side of Aura River, the route she took still held the potential for unexpected encounters, as this path is one of the busiest and most preferred walkways in the center of Turku. For example, at the beginning of the performance, near the Cathedral Bridge, she passed by a bus stop where a few people were waiting for public transport, while a few others appeared to be keenly following her performance (Fig. 5). This photograph shows that a few bystanders took pictures and/or videos of the walking artist to capture this instance of the performance that they had suddenly witnessed. Some of the attendees gazed at the performer curiously, apparently attempting to make sense of what they were experiencing at that very moment. The appearance of the performer clearly drew interest and curiosity, as it might be considered unusual and extraordinary from the standpoint of everyday experience. In one instance, the interest in the performer became a little more than just acts of taking photographs or recording videos. Saarikoski describes this instance as follows: “Somewhere at the beginning of the performance, a cyclist almost crashed into me. It was not very violent. Perhaps this cyclist wanted to try taking a charcoal piece from the suit. But, of course, this made me a little bit scared because I thought about what might happen next. I asked myself whether I would be able to complete this performance.”⁵³

The sense of concern that the artist expresses is related to the aforementioned fragility of the charcoal pieces. If an external force, in this case a cyclist, crashed into the performer, this crash could have significantly damaged the charcoal suit. At the same time, this instance exemplifies how much attention the performance received from the city dwellers and how vividly the suit participated in drawing attention and generating wonder in the audience and passersby. This became even more prominent when the performer reached the Cathedral Bridge, where an unexpected encounter was captured in a photograph (fig. 6).

⁵³ Saarikoski 21.3.2021.



Figure 6. Hanna Saarikoski, *Performance C*, 22.9.2018, photograph by Antti Laitinen © Hanna Saarikoski and Antti Laitinen, Turku, Finland.

In my reading, this picture gives the impression that the passerby in the photograph happened to come across the performer while crossing the bridge, without being aware of the performance beforehand. The sudden encounter seems to have allured and surprised the passerby, who is gazing curiously at the performer (for the unblurred photos see footnote 24). The picture suggests that they find the suit-wearing performer strange and yet they appear intrigued as they pass the performer at a close distance.

The described instances aptly demonstrate how performance C was able to offer surprising encounters to both passersby and those who intentionally participated in the performance. The “strangeness” of the suit works to activate the imagination and suspend everyday experience for a moment. Referring to their own collaborative practice, performance artist Cecilia Lagerström calls this kind of experience a “process of making strange” that can entail “not recognizing” and “not knowing” the unfolding process of performance.⁵⁴ Similarly, in the C, the encounters that the charcoal suit and the artist co-facilitated amounted to unusual, “strange” experiences that offered the recipients an opportunity *not* to know or understand what is happening in the present. Thereby, the co-performers facilitated surprising encounters that served as an invitation to wonder about what the performance aimed to inspire.

Arguably, a momentary, surprising encounter is one of the key features of performance art that makes it so efficacious. Antony Howell, the prominent performance artist, argues that surprise “lifts the performance out of the predictable into the unpredictable”; without this element, one can only create a field of performance that lacks emphasis.⁵⁵ The performance theorist Diana Taylor also emphasizes that creating “a field of performance” with an emphasis, “a performance could pop up anywhere, at any moment...,” while participants “sometimes found themselves unexpectedly and involuntarily involved in the event.”⁵⁶ This is one of the ways in which a performance may work to generate an influence on the participants and attendees.

I suggest that the more-than-human performer of C affectively surprised many of the participants and passersby. In creating such surprising, autonomous events, the charcoal

54 Lagerström 2015, 72.

55 Howell 2002, 80.

56 Taylor 2016, 49.

suit worked as the epicenter of the performance. It did so by moving with the artist, producing specific auditory effects—the scratchy, rustling sounds—creating visualities, and enabling surprising and unexpected encounters. In their co-edited book *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*, Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil propose that wearable agencies should not be seen only as being “in service of” performance in a subordinate role, but rather as a central contributor to an often-renewed sense of collective practice, proposing new directions in turn, to the making of performance itself.⁵⁷ The charcoal suit in C does much more than merely enveloping the artist’s body. It becomes a fellow performer, proposing new directions and guiding the artist along the way. For example, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the artist initially wanted to take a cable ferry across the Aura River and also planned to walk across the bridges. However, when the suit became painfully heavy after the first twenty minutes of the performance, the artist needed to revise her initial plan by only walking along the east side of the Aura River.⁵⁸ This means that the suit participated in deciding the route taken and thus played a key role in who the performer encountered (Fig. 7). Saarikoski makes the following remarks on her imbrication with the charcoal suit: “When I was doing the performance, I was mainly concentrating on how to move with the suit so that I did not have to act like anything. [I focused on] how to be the creature who is inside the suit. I did not feel that it was me inside the suit, but I did not feel that I was playing a role either. I let things happen.”⁵⁹

To enable the charcoal “monster” to wander around downtown Turku, the artist was required to move very slowly and carefully to keep the suit intact—the fragile structure of the charcoal pieces “demanded” such attention. In turn, this slowness gave the creature a special ability to emphasize each moment of its movement, highlighting each second by slowly “sculpting” the performance. Walking at a slow speed and engaging with the surroundings at an unhurried pace may have intensified the sensations that the performance offered. Indeed, participants Sirén and Kärkkäinen both stress that they were particularly “impressed” and “surprised” by the slowness of the performer.⁶⁰

A Political Demonstration

The affective influence of performance usually carries a political tone, especially when it happens in a public space where it can make an intervention by giving rise to new visibilities. Public space, according to Rancière, is a place where consensus often prevails to keep the order in terms of what is permitted to be visible and sensible, and this always works in favor of those who are accounted as partakers in a given community.⁶¹ As opposed to that, “dissensual” aesthetic experience interrupts commonsense perceptions as it has the potential to exceed the usual expectations of the public. Thus, a “dissensual”, autonomous experience can also accord agency to those who are not counted as partakers. On the other hand, for Bennett, the creation of political influence should not be limited to human agency only. Rather, it should be expanded to include non-human agencies as these also can interrupt a state of consensus in the public sphere. Non-human agencies do not have to obey and pursue “the aim, tendency, or characteristic of human agencies” in generating an influence. Instead, they exhibit their own kinds of power to engender surprising, politically meaningful, and affective events.⁶²

57 Pantouvaki & McNeil 2021, 1.

58 Saarikoski 13.12.2022.

59 Saarikoski 21.3.2021.

60 Sirén 14.12.2022; Kärkkäinen 12.12.2022.

61 Rancière 2010, 42.

62 Bennett 2010, 27.



Figure 7. Hanna Saarikoski, Performance C, 22.9.2018, photograph by Antti Laitinen © Hanna Saarikoski and Antti Laitinen, Turku, Finland.

The appearance of the suit actively contributed to engendering surprising encounters, as the charcoal pieces attached to the suit bear a resemblance to the hairy or furry appearance of various non-human or more-than-human creatures. The suit-wearing body may remind one of a character from fiction or mythology, such as Bigfoot. In fact, the two participants of the performance associated the suit with two different cultural and fictional characters. Sirén associated the performer in the suit with the “Boogieman” from folklore and popular culture, while Kärkkäinen linked it with “Mörkö” from the Finnish *Moomins* books written by Tove Jansson.⁶³ There are various versions of these more-than-human creatures in different cultures, and they serve different social purposes. For example, they can suddenly appear to warn about “moral and social transgressions of the time,” thereby functioning as “teaching tools” to encourage changing personal and social wrongdoings.⁶⁴ These creatures have a scariness to them, as they warn of the consequences of misbehaviors. Indeed, in social media posts regarding C, one commentator described the charcoal figure as “really nice but a little scary,” while another one considered it “quite scary.”⁶⁵ Although this performance does not necessarily include intentional anthropological or cultural references, the perceptions of participants and commentators—as a charcoal “monster” in my own impression, too—allow me to suggest that the suit leads the recipients to connect the performer with something “strange” or, in the words of Anthea Moys, “otherworldly” that does not belong in the realm of usual everyday experiences.

Notably the noun “monster” and the verb “demonstrate” are etymologically connected. For example, “monster is a derivative form of ‘monere’ from Latin and means to advise, warn, teach, and to make think of, while the verb ‘demonstrate’ from the Latin ‘monstrum’ means to entirely point out, show, and wonder.”⁶⁶ In the context of these etymological links, the charcoal “monster” of C comes to Turku city center and walks amongst its dwellers to warn of transgressions integral to the current moment: the disastrous human impact on the Earth’s environment. Thus, the “monster” in C *demonstrates* that the ecological catastrophe is socially and politically urgent and ongoing, but still not adequately noticed.

This is what a “dissensual”, autonomous aesthetic event can do: it makes the invisible

63 Sirén 14.12.2022; Kärkkäinen 12.12.2022.

64 D’Costa 2016.

65 Ojala @pilvivalpuri 2018; Minna @minnaslifeinspiration 2018.

66 Harper s.a.

visible or, in other words, redistributes sensibilities in a way that makes what was imperceptible become perceptible. Therefore, the artist and the suit co-create a political intervention by enabling this charcoal “monster” to stage a performative *demonstration* that can catalyze a political sensation regarding the topic of the human carbon footprint. The “monster” thus offers a transformative aesthetic experience, which may persuade people to increasingly face this issue and encourage us to rethink the impact of human beings on the environment.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that the main agencies of performance *C*—the artist Hanna Saarikoski and the charcoal suit—politicized the human-induced ecological crisis by reverberating and demonstrating the embodiment of the problem at stake: the Anthropocene. I emphasized the contribution of the suit by explicating how non-human agencies participated in engendering political influence by sensorial means: for example, by producing distinctive sounds, creating stimulating visualities, as well as generating surprising encounters. My aim was to extend the conventional understanding of political agency, which has traditionally been granted only to humans in politics and political performance art, to more-than-human agencies as well. In this way, the case of the charcoal suit aligns with current approaches in costume, theatre, and performance studies which focus on material and non-human agencies.

I showed that the wearable agency of *C* was not mute or devoid of capacity in the sense of just passively following the artist’s tendencies, intentions, and aims. Rather, the suit proposed new directions for the performer and affected the emerging interactions throughout the performance: The charcoal suit worked as a co-performer. The analyzed material explicitly revealed that the suit, or the charcoal “monster,” communicated with the performance participants and passersby in distinctive ways to generate felt experiences of the human ecological footprint. These findings suggest that the non-human agency of *C*, namely the charcoal suit, enabled the artist to catalyze a political intervention in and through this performance.

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