



UDK 792.01:7.038.531(497.4):502

DOI 10.51937/Amfiteater-2026-1/252-268

Abstract

The article proposes a way of ecologising the analytical lens for environmental site-specific artworks by responding more closely to the conditions of their sites. It emerges from the observation that environmental art is often evaluated primarily through the lens of impact, particularly in cultural policy and everyday criticism, thereby reinforcing quantitative evaluative frameworks. The article first critically examines this tendency by mapping two evaluative oppositions, aestheticist and solutionist. The former responds to the idea of art's intrinsic value, while the latter emphasises its instrumental value. Both, however, tend to separate the artwork from its site. In response, the article proposes an arboreal analysis, inspired by Manuela Infante's plant-based dramaturgy and developed through an analysis of Neja Tomšič's storytelling walk, *Untangling a Garden III*, part of a long-term research on Rafutski Park. Through three analytical categories, rooting, branching and entangling, the approach understands the artwork as deeply conditioned by and intertwined with its site, thereby challenging the dualistic division between artwork and environment as well as drawing on Donna Haraway's concept of *natureculture*. The arboreal analysis raises the question of the mobility or transportability of site-specific works through the lens of commodification, highlighting it as a key category for understanding the complex ecological and production conditions in which the artworks operate today.

Keywords: arboreal analysis, Neja Tomšič, Rafutski Park, *Untangling a Garden III*, instrumentalisation, commodification

Tery Žeželj (1995) completed her master's studies in Contemporary Theatre, Dance, and Dramaturgy at Utrecht University. She had an internship at Framer Framed in Amsterdam and on the project *How to exit a reality (Attempt 1 of 19)* by Andrea Božić and Julia Willms. Afterwards, she was self-employed in the cultural sector. Since 2023, she has been part of the artistic board at Glej Theatre. Currently, she is employed as a research assistant at the University of Nova Gorica, researching avant-garde art from socialist Yugoslavia through the lens of water.

tery.zezelj@ung.si

Arboreal Analysis: Towards a Site-Responsive Approach in Analysing Site-Specific Art

Tery Žeželj

Research Centre for Humanities, University of Nova Gorica

1 Introduction

Surrounded by more than 1,100 trees, even a brief wander through a relatively modest area of Rafutski Park, lying on the national border, gives the impression of having walked much further and encountered evidence of diverse imprints from the world.¹ Gathering species rarely found in its proximity, if found at all, the park is a place of rare ecological crossroads. To be situated in such a space through an artistic practice, in this case, through an experience of a storytelling walk, *Untangling a Garden III* by Neja Tomšič, felt like collapsing into the overlap of multiple time scales and lived experiences, developing a dependency on presences that emerged. As the walk is structured by a prologue and seven stories, each of them centring on one of the tree species in the park, the experience of the sense of being bound to the site unfolded through spending time in the park and immersing oneself in the narrated relationships between humans and trees, creating a format that resists an easy identification as an autonomous artwork. Which analytical framework could be used to analyse the situatedness of this work, which merges realities and immerses the audience in the park?

Sharing an interest with multiple contributors for this issue on the intersection of performing arts and ecology, and being deeply inspired by such artistic practices, I started to notice, also through the discussions with colleagues, a growing frustration with an internalised tendency for connecting cultural production on climate change in a utilitarian manner that is strongly moralised. Through the discussions with my partner Arne, to whom this contribution owes a lot, I became aware of a trend in my thinking toward narrowing artistic practices by positively valuing certain artistic strategies (such as slowness, intimacy, site-specificity) or concepts from environmental humanities (for example, entanglements, care, nonhuman agency) and uncritically connecting them to the idea of a *better* and more sustainable

¹ The research is part of the research programme "Transdisciplinary Research of Identities and Cultures", co-funded by Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (P6-0461).

future. Importantly, directly translating the artistic strategies into environmental impact lacks a framework to complexify the reality of art and artistic production by acknowledging and reflecting the limitations of art, especially institutional art, which is bound to overproduction, to the demand for innovation and enclosed within its own circle.

This contribution consists of two parts. The first focuses on the evaluation of environmental art, reflecting on the personal tendency of arguing for an ecological or societal impact of artworks by rapid, overly comprehensive, sometimes even hollow connections between artistic strategies and societal and ecological issues, and critically evaluating the measure of the impact which sometimes emerges when analysing the artworks through the ecological perspective. The second part turns to the analysis. By proposing an ecologised lens for understanding how artworks operate, it aims to outline a framework that may offer evaluative criteria beyond the notion of impact. It examines the aforementioned artistic experience of Neja Tomšič's *Untangling a Garden III* and, through this case study, reflects on mutual dependency between the site and the artwork as a way to move beyond impact-based evaluation and toward a relational understanding of environmental art. It explores the potential of an analytical response to site-specificity, one that also responds to the natural environment of the work, to understand the artwork as a sprout or emergence from the environment rather than solely from human creativity. The last part aims to critically reflect on this proposal by situating it within broader tendencies toward the production of experiences in contemporary artistic practices, particularly in a sociopolitical context in which the service economy accounts for a large share of economic activity, and so the market logic tends to reduce such practices to commodities.

2 Evaluating Environmental Art and Arboreal Analysis

As environmental art emerges from engagements with natural environments, natural materials or ecological concerns, it is necessarily entangled with realities beyond the sphere of art and always challenges the idea of artistic autonomy. In the following section, I will briefly sketch a few highly simplified stances for evaluating art and its relationship to its broader context to highlight the underlying assumptions and evaluative criteria that inform each position and to critically reflect on thinking art through the notion of impact. Afterwards, I will focus on the selected case study to articulate a possibility for critically evaluating environmental art beyond a direct or applicable solution outside the sphere of art.

2.1 Beyond Impact as a Measure

While art remains intertwined with society, the idea of art as autonomous, representing one end of the spectrum of artistic autonomy and its social function, emerged alongside the division of manual and intellectual labour (Stakemeier 14). This shift toward the primacy of the aesthetic experience culminated in the bourgeois society, in a stance promoted by the 19th-century idea of *l'art pour l'art*. As Kerstin Stakemeier writes, “in order to not ideologically collide with the former religious or feudal use values of the artworks the artworks’ early bourgeois acclamations had to render them purposeless, free from any applied function – ultimately *aesthetic*” (14). This radically aestheticist perspective (which has changed over the centuries, so it is important to acknowledge that it is simplified in this text in order to remain within its scope) thus insists on the autonomy of art and its independence from any external purposes. It promotes the idea that art is not subordinated to any political or practical goals and restricts the evaluative judgement to the work’s aesthetic and experiential properties, resisting any criteria that are not immanent to the work itself.

Critical responses to environmental artworks, however, often seem to apply ethical, political or practical judgements through objections such as that the works are *preaching to the choir* or moralising or through a critique that they fail to provide any concrete solution. All these comments are rooted in the other end of the spectrum, in a solution-oriented view of art that prioritises the novelty of the ideas it produces. In this solutionist approach, art is seen as a means to achieve something beyond its own sphere. In such a position, there is, as we can see in the European cultural policy (see the report *State of Culture* from 2024 by Culture Action Europe), but also in the earlier cultural policies from the second half of the 20th century, a risk in creating and legitimising a framework which imposes an evaluating structure of impact on the artwork. It reduces artistic practice to the spectrum from failure to success, making it reasonable to dismiss art as a public good based on its potential failure to fulfil political goals of improving social welfare. Or, as Belfiore notes, it supports “the belief that since the arts are made possible by the commitment made by society through public spending, it is to be expected that they should have clear responsibilities towards the society that maintains them alive” (21).

From the solutionist perspective, the works should provide a better understanding of climate change, function as a medium to make ecological threats perceptible, as one of the means of informing audiences, as an amplifier of awareness about it, or as the initiators of a change. Here, art has the potential to change *our* consciousness with a belief that this will cause a mobilisation to move *us* closer to, for example, an end of extractivist and destructive practices. This perspective aligns with some of the trends in the environmental humanities. While the authors resist reducing art to its

impact and do not call for the transformation of the whole of artistic production, they nonetheless argue for the recognition of art's importance by locating the possibility of transformation in changes to the predominant imaginaries. They frame art as one of the key mobilisers for such change. This is captured, for example, in the quote "[h]ow we live in the world is contingent upon how we imagine that world to be" (Neimanis and Loewen Walker 563).

In the scholarship on the topic of ecology and performing arts, we can follow this already in one of the earliest cornerstones, in Una Chaudhuri's "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater" from 1994, where the author writes about the theatre as a place for "a much-needed ecological consciousness" (28). This argument resonates with much of a contemporary theory where theatre continues to be understood as an active site of ecological thought. For example, in an ecocritical study of the American theatre in the 20th century, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theatre*, from 2021, professor of theatre, Theresa J. May, understands theatre as a place of social change (3), which takes Chaudhuri's argument even a step further. May sees theatre as "a practice of collaborative imagination and collective conjuring" (4) that can transform our collective consciousness and therefore "intervene in the large master narratives that have helped perpetuate environmental injustice" (4). While these examples raise the question of what art can do in the face of ecological catastrophe, arguing that change is necessary and can occur within the sphere of art as a public good, they also seem to overstate the transformative power of art by making connections on the symbolic level and lacking material grounding.

These two extremes, the aestheticist and the solutionist perspectives, correspond to the two opposite ways of valuing art, namely, for its instrumental value on the one hand, and for its intrinsic value on the other. If generalising, instrumental value is more often promoted in the sphere of cultural policy and funding bodies (for a critical analysis of "hyperinstrumentalism" see the article by Steven Hadley and Clive Gray or the one by Eleonora Belfiore), while the intrinsic value is often more strongly reflected upon in the field of philosophy, art and art theory. It is important to note, however, that these approaches are often combined in more complex ways and vary greatly in terms of the specificity and context of the work.

I would like to propose that both the solutionist and the aestheticist perspectives are produced on the binary opposition of art and its environment. While the aestheticist approach tends to simplify the environment by subordinating it to aesthetic concerns, positioning it as a passive backdrop, the solutionist perspective risks reducing both art to its external outcomes and the environment to something given and universal. In the following section, I focus on the storytelling walk *Untangling a Garden III*. I aim to propose an analytical framework that responds to the park, which is both the site

of the artwork and the focus of the research, to embed the analysis in a non-dualistic view of *natureculture* (Donna Haraway) and thus recognise the reciprocity between art and the environment in which it occurs. The proposal to make it necessary to respond to the work's locality can already be traced back to a call by Una Chaudhuri from the same text as quoted above. Namely, the author calls to "join ecological concerns with the protocols of 'site-specific' theatre" to "directly engage the actual ecological problems of particular environments" (24). This deeply resonates with the following proposal to analyse artistic practices as situated practices shaped by the specificities of the environments in and with which they work.

2.2 Case Study: *Untangling a Garden III*

In the storytelling walk, *Untangling a Garden III*, which premièred in September 2025 in a production by Glej Theatre and the European Capital of Culture GO! 2025 Nova Gorica–Gorizia, I had the opportunity to accompany a part of the process as a dramaturg, thus my analysis stems from quite a deep engagement with the work and with the creators. However, the following categories for analysis emerged only retrospectively, as a way of reflecting on the project. They were not used during the creative process.

The author of the artistic research on Rafutski Park, *Untangling a Garden*, Neja Tomšič, has a background in visual arts. Her practice is research-based, stemming from the intersection of writing, storytelling, drawing, ritual creation and performance. It is structured around long-term projects with multiple, diverse public iterations to tackle the investigated phenomena. She has been working intensively in the field of performing arts since her 2017 project, *Opium Clippers*, and is one of the leading representatives of performing arts research in the Slovenian context. The focus of her work is often shaped through the examination of a space, an approach central also to the present project, which is part of this longer research project. Tomšič is also a member of the Nonument Group, which focuses on the study of public spaces.

The project on Rafutski Park started in 2020 and is, as we can read on Tomšič's website:

interweaving stories from its history with its botany, and unravelling the imagination related to the park, as well as to the intense period of exchanges between Slovenia and Egypt at the turn of the 20th century and in the first half of the 20th century. The starting point of the research is the botanical archaeology of the park, i.e. the historical, cultural, mythological and symbolic aspects of plants. The project links them with historical and social changes [...] but above all, it seeks to outline the rich and complex lives of plants through research, performance and community events in Rafutski Park.

Up till now, the project has had multiple iterations, including the planting of Solkan radichio, a sound installation, a performance-in-progress presented in Cukrarna Gallery in Ljubljana, where Tomšič was mapping the site's architecture and linking it with plants brought from Slovenia to Alexandria, and a geo-located audio walk for Rafutski Park. An event of a similar format to *Untangling a Garden III* already took place in autumn 2024, when Tomšič invited seven collaborators with diverse backgrounds to participate as storytellers and to prepare a story stemming from one of the park's trees. For the present format, we continued to work with the same stories, composed by Ana Čavić, Maja Čehovin Korsika, Ana Duša, Rok Kušlan, Katarina Nahtigal, Katja Šulc, Neja Tomšič, Silvia Viviani and, additionally, with the vocal group Ardeo that performed and sang vocal compositions by Gašper Torkar.

The stories focus on seven trees, each of a different species. These trees, bamboo, cypress, magnolia, wisteria, yew, cork oak and wild cherry, serve as windows into the tangled realities that we experience in the park during the event. At the beginning, the hosts gather the audience and lead them to the small auditorium in the park. Here, on the stairs in the auditorium, Neja Tomšič awaits. She contextualises one of the earliest exotic parks in today's Slovenian territory, focusing on its location and its trajectories from the moment it was bought by Anton Laščak in the first half of the 20th century. Laščak built a neo-oriental style villa. While this building remains a focal attraction in the park, Tomšič's research focuses on the park's natural environment, its trees and the fact that the park's unique microclimate nurtures species found nowhere else in Slovenia. At the end of Tomšič's narrative, the female choir Ardeo starts repetitively singing the Latin name of the first tree station, bamboo. Hearing them sing draws the audience's attention to the bamboo forest in front of the auditorium, where the singers are standing. Throughout the performance, their short compositions – each a repetitive vocal setting of the Latin name of the next tree – mark the transitions, calling the audience to move from one tree to the next. The walk is circular, so the event ends with the second visit to the auditorium, where the choir and all the storytellers perform a singing and storytelling score, gathering short passages from each story.

2.3 Arboreal Analysis

In the work, the trees are not only the topic of each narrative but agents of rooting the storytelling and anchoring the stories while also expanding our understanding of the park. The seven narratives that follow the prologue are, to different extents, collages of personal experiences, oral history, scientific and botanical facts, mythical accounts and historical material. As each narrative itself already offers more than one possible mode of grasping the reality of a tree and of the park, we are guided through several inconsistent, partial and provisional attempts to grasp the complexity of the site. The

park gradually emerges as a multilayered place, shaped by countless realities from its past, activating many different associations and interpretations.

The work's topic or content is also its site. Because of that, I propose to also inform the analysis by the site, adopting what I will refer to as an "arboreal" approach. Analyses of performances usually rely on medium-specific frameworks and performing arts categories to understand how meaning is organised. For instance, Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx's model for analysis approaches the works through the lens of dramaturgy, understanding it as a relational approach which "concerns the meaningful coherence of all theatrical means employed, of their organisation and structure in time and space, and how their interplay generates meaning and experience" (7). Their dramaturgical analysis thus foregrounds the relationships between the work, the space and the audience. The arboreal approach proposed here is deeply inspired by this relational orientation and the emphasis on the space. However, instead of adopting pre-existing dramaturgical planes, as in the above-mentioned example, the "principles of composition, modes of addressing the spectator, and ways in which a performance relates to wider social and artistic contexts" (6), the arboreal approach seeks its analytical logic in the site itself. It understands the work as an emergence from the site and thus focuses also on its process. In doing so, it borrows a structuring logic from outside the theatrical medium, from the trees, and is inspired by seeing the work as a living organism.

In thinking about this, I am inspired by a conversation on plant-based dramaturgy with Manuela Infante in the "Transmission in Motion" seminar series organised by Utrecht University in 2020, where Infante presented the strategies of structuring performance *Estado Vegetal*. She developed the plant-based procedures of deep time, ramification, morphing and branching out. As Maaïke Bleeker writes about the process of creating this work, "[d]oing dramaturgy involved feeding the process with insights from plant philosophy and plant neurology, speculating on the possibilities of plant logic, analysing the potential and implications of this logic, and structuring the materials being created" (191). While Infante's work used plant-based logic in the creation of the piece, I adopt a tree logic to analyse the work by abstracting from the existence of the trees to articulate the approaches their logic suggests. Three characteristics appear particularly productive for analysing *Untangling a Garden III*: branching, entangling and rooting.

In what ways can branching, entangling and rooting operate as analytical categories to analyse a performative artwork? Branching, as a logic of something leading to multiple directions, draws attention, first, to the structure of the performance, in this case, the stationary rhythm of eight stops connected by passages of walking and singing interventions; second, to the narrative logic of each story; and third, to the connections

and relations in their content. Entangling raises the question of which relations the work acknowledges and which connections it generates. Rooting, on the other hand, asks how and where the work situates itself. Together, these three foci aim to understand the park and the trees not just as a backdrop, a scenography, a material, a performer, a medium or a theme, but as collaborators that require certain procedures to insist on the entanglement of human and nonhuman agents, of past presences and present intentions, of dispersed geographies and cosmologies. I will try to reflect on the extent to which the work *Untangling a Garden III* responds to them.

To begin with, what branches in the performance, and how? As seen in the title of the event, *Untangling a Garden III*, the iterations themselves seem to be conceived as branches of a longer project, sharing the same title and distinguished only by the order of public presentations and their position in the development of the research. The whole walk consists of particular stories and, between walks, narrative fragments and transitions. While the prologue establishes a clear and shared point of departure, the stories are, to a certain degree, independent and function as parallels, producing a dramaturgy of branching. When the storytellers and the choir gather at the end in the auditorium, they perform a score that collects short citations from each story. These repetitions do not synthesise the experience but function more as an echo that opens a moment for reflection by remembering and reassembling, a time capsule for the audience to establish and stay with their own connections.

The stories differ in perspective and draw from biology, mythology, history, geography, personal experience, literature and tradition and thus function as little branches through which the park's realities can spread. While some details refer to another story, they are quite independent or unconditioned by others. Even each particular story does not follow a linear logic of telling a story about the tree, but takes the tree as a focal point around which different aspects are woven. Travelling through the seven stations becomes a process of sedimentation, enriching the park's reality, without any intention to fully grasp it or to create a closure. Although the event is structured around storytelling stations and shaped by language, the act of walking between the selected trees, possibly associated with a procession, introduces an embodied dimension. Movement intensifies the branching of associations. The brief passages, sometimes silent, sometimes filled with conversation, allow for a sensorial encounter, each time enchanted by one more story. They create small windows for wandering.

As parks bear witness to countless individual and collective events and print them into the landscape itself, walking and being in a park itself evokes an associative engagement and modes of rest, recreation, sociality, contemplation and withdrawal. In this sense, branching not only reveals the structural logic of the performance but also reveals how the park, as an associative field, is continually activated. Besides that,

working with the park also forges connections across dispersed realities, linking us to other places and times through the stories themselves. Such a networked perspective is already a consequence of the park's own heterogeneity, as it gathers species that would rarely be found growing together.

The next aspect of the proposed arboreal lens, entangling, exposes the associative strands that stem from the site: mythological, scientific, personal and chronological attempts to grasp the trees and the environments we live with. It also strongly highlights the role of the choir that is always introducing the next stop by exposing the botanical dimension of plant classification. The choir unifies the stations into one immersive experience and intensifies the performativity of the event through its recurrent presence. By using methods of storytelling and singing, *Untangling a Garden III* foregrounds the significance of voice and language for the exchange and sharing of diverse realities. In focusing on entangling, which emphasises the collective meaning-making, it is crucial to mention the collaborative and, in a way, curatorial approach in creating this work. Tomšič invited seven collaborators to create their own stories in their own ways, alongside a choir and a composer. By contributing and "planting" their stories or compositions within the park, each participating collaborator multiplies the layers of the park.

While the analysis through branching and entangling focused primarily on procedural principles that generate an affective experience of the park's complexity, rooting foregrounds how the work is anchored to the site, in this case, emphasising its situatedness and the mutual dependence between the artwork and the park. The experience of the whole format of the storytelling walk is inseparable from the site. Most of the elements of the work, spatial organisation, dramaturgy, the light, sounds and the conceptual context, depend on the conditions of the park. In this sense, the park defines the dramaturgy of the work, demanding an immersive participation and cultivating a very embodied eye (and ear). The stories, however, remain dispersed, open-ended and exploratory, allowing the stories to continue the oral tradition of circulating and maintaining an interpretative flexibility. They are rooted in the park mainly at the level of their initial narrative framing. The trees are treated primarily as symbols, often referencing their roles in folk beliefs and connecting spiritual and mythical practices from around the world, situating them within human perception. This symbolic framing might be connected to the fact that the trees are encountered in the park and taken as parts of the park, of the human-made space, which strongly constructs and frames what we perceive as nature.

The rootedness of the research practice and of the structure of the event, marked by the intensified presence of the site and its embodied experience, contrasts with a certain uprootedness of the narratives themselves. Apart from Tomšič's prologue,

the stories could potentially be transposed to a tree of the same species elsewhere, revealing a tension between the situatedness of the format and the relative mobility of its narratives. This link between abstraction and transportability calls for a broader consideration of site-specificity in terms of the extent to which the work is tied to its site and raises the question of how site-specific works operate under contemporary ecological concerns and the instrumentalising tendencies of cultural policy. In what follows, I remain with this tension and approach it through the lens of commodification.

2.4 Site-Specificity in the Experience Economy

Site-specific art gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, as part of a broader neo-avant-garde tendency to exit spaces traditionally dedicated to art and bring art closer to life. In the 1997 article “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity”, which is of crucial importance for the development of this section, Miwon Kwon shows that the resistance to commodification was among the key motivations for the move of artistic practices into natural environments or everyday spaces (86). Following Kwon, the immobility of site-specific works opposed and challenged the modernist paradigm of art as “autonomous and self-referential, and thus transportable, placeless and nomadic” (85). As they were tied to specific locations, the works resisted the logic of the “capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods” (86). Site-specificity thus functioned also as a strategy to disable the commodification of art.

It is worth noting that the turn to site-specificity in art coincides with and is often connected to the growth of environmental activism in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, the site in some early site-specific works often functioned primarily as an abstract replacement for the canvas or other traditional media, and its ecological and material conditions remained unaddressed. Under contemporary ecological pressures, however, the meaning and stakes of site-specificity in natural environments shift significantly. The question of mobility, therefore, also raises a question of how a work relates to its environment, whether it commodifies the site itself, restores it, treats it primarily as an aesthetic background, exposes its vulnerabilities, or renders it interchangeable. From this perspective, the degree to which a work abstracts from its site may invite criticism for commodifying the environment from which it emerges, effectively making it exchangeable with another location. The longer exploration of this, however, lies beyond the scope of this article.

Importantly, Miwon Kwon later complicates the relationship between mobility and commodification. Observing the shifts of the conditions in which site-specificity

operates, she notes that “the site has been transformed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual” (95) and that “the art work is becoming more and more ‘unhinged’ from the actuality of the site” (96). As the opposition between site-specificity and commodification becomes less obvious, Kwon poses a question that crucially shapes this contribution: “what is the commodity status of anti-commodities, that is, immaterial, process-oriented, ephemeral, performative events?” (96)

Following her, the commodification of art is not solely related “to the realm of manufacturing (of things) but defined in relation to the service and management industries” (102) as experiences become valuable commodities. Kwon links this shift to the changing role of artists, in which they are produced as brands of artistic expertise, as nomadic producers across sites, and as providers of “interventionary services” (103). Kwon’s contribution to understanding how site-specificity is transformed into a sought-after product within capitalism, which privileges experience and authenticity, is invaluable to the present argument. In this sense, experiential artworks in natural environments may strongly mirror and respond to the needs of contemporary capital. Site-specificity itself, when it promises direct responses to climate change, can become a value in itself for the solutionist perspective.

3 Conclusion

The examination of the work through the notion of rootedness led to the lens of commodification. Once site-specificity is situated within a system of commodification, a closer interrogation of this critical framework is required. Firstly, as Christoph Hermann writes in *The Critique of Commodification: Contours of a Post-Capitalist Society*, the term gained academic prominence in the 1970s, initially in theoretical inquiries on art, moving away from its Marxist roots (2). By non-Marxists, it was used “to criticize certain aspects of capitalism, such as the sale of goods that are not suitable for exchange on markets” but not for a “fundamental critique of capitalism” (4). Importantly, the arboreal analysis proposed here examines the work through its relationship with the site rather than treating site-specificity as a stable format or property of the work. It does not aim to critique or moralise the work’s position in contemporary society, but rather traces how it operates in a commodified landscape and how it rearticulates its own use value through the relationships it establishes with the site and its participants, potentially countering or reshaping the consumerist logic.

Secondly, the proposed arboreal approach analyses the work through categories that emerge from the site itself, rather than applying pre-existing categories from art theory. Taken together, all three principles of branching, entangling and rooting

emphasise the interrelatedness of the work, the site, the audience and the authors, highlighting its embeddedness in material, social and ecological conditions. This approach seeks to move beyond the dualistic framing of art and environment, which risks either simplifying the artwork or reducing the environment's complexity. It emerges as a critical response to the solutionist mode of evaluation that often dominates discussions of environmental art, where artworks are framed primarily as responses to ecological concerns.

Situating the analysis itself in the location of the performance aims to prolong the agency of the environments that helped shape the experience. However, these categories of entangling, branching and rooting introduce a level of abstraction. Much like the stories, this analytical lens abstracts from the trees and translates their logic into conceptual terms. While it draws on relations in the environment, it risks using them as generalised metaphors and simplifying the specificity and singularity of the trees and the site in order to focus on the artwork in isolation. Nevertheless, this methodological mobility, which is similar to the pre-existing categories in artistic analyses, is, to a certain extent, important as it might prove useful for analysing other works if it remains attentive to what is lost. Its value does not lie in capturing the complexity of ecological processes themselves but in drawing attention to them.

To conclude, *Untangling a Garden III* navigates multiple, interwoven tensions that demand attention in their complexity, resisting any simplistic judgement that simply affirms or criticises the work. They reveal the complexities that contemporary artistic practices navigate. For example, on the one hand, the work was produced within the framework of the European Capital of Culture programme, which often serves touristic and municipal agendas to increase the value of urban places. On the other hand, the work was researched and situated in the park, the significance of which exceeds mere cultural branding. These seemingly opposing dynamics collectively shape the work's meaning. Ultimately, the arboreal analysis aims to lay out a field for attending to how works navigate between institutional frameworks, ecological realities and the unpredictability of a site, showing that the return to paradise, to the Garden of Eden, is impossible because the very idea of paradise is different. Nature as such, as Timothy Morton wrote, does not exist (1).

- Belfiore, Eleonora. "Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does It Really Work? A Critique of Instrumental Cultural Policies and Social Impact Studies in the UK." *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2002, pp. 91–106. https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/53047/1/WRAP_Belfiore_Social%20Inclusion%202002%20WRAP.pdf. Accessed 12 Mar. 2026.
- Bleeker, Maaïke. *Doing Dramaturgy: Thinking Through Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
- Chaudhuri, Una. "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater." *Theater*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1994, pp. 23–31.
- Dietz, Linus W., et al. "Understanding the Potential of Urban Parks to Promote Well-Being." *Nature Cities*, vol. 2, 2025, pp. 1205–1216.
- Hadley, Steven, and Clive Gray. "Hyperinstrumentalism and Cultural Policy: Means to an End or an End to Meaning?" *Cultural Trends*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2017, pp. 95–106.
- Haraway, Donna J. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- Hermann, Christoph. *The Critique of Commodification: Contours of a Post-Capitalist Society*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Kwon, Miwon. "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity." *October*, vol. 80, 1997, pp. 85–110.
- May, Theresa J. *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*. Routledge, 2021. Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Neimanis, Astrida, and Rachel Loewen Walker. "Weathering: Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality." *Hypatia*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2014, pp. 558–575.
- Nibbelink, Liesbeth Groot, and Sigrid Merx. "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach." *Forum+*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2021, pp. 4–16. <https://doi.org/10.5117/forum2021.3.002.groo>.
- Polivtseva, Elena. *State of Culture Report*. Culture Action Europe, 2024. https://cultureactioneurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/State-of-Culture-Report_final_version.pdf. Accessed 12 Mar. 2026.
- Stakemeier, Kerstin. "(Not) More Autonomy." *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis & Contemporary Art*, edited by Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, Mute, 2016, pp. 7–32.
- Tomšič, Neja. "Untangling a Garden." <https://ne-ja.com/untangling-a-garden>. Accessed 12 Mar. 2026.