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*A(u/r)tistic Eco poet(h)ics*

A Whirlwind

*Eco(po)éticas A(u/r)tist(ic)as*

Um Redemoinho

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I intertwine ecoperformance as a 'windy' word with disability and neurodivergence envisioned as powerful winds of change, as ways of being in the world that offer breathing room to the more-than-human. I first listen to the echoes and resonances between ecoperformance and autistic ways of being in the world, before considering what disability studies can bring to ecoperformance.

**Keywords:** Ecoperformance; Autism; Neurodivergence; Disability; Disabled Ecologies.

## RESUMO

Neste artigo, tomo o termo ecoperformance como uma palavra 'arejada' e o correlaciono às noções de deficiência e neurodivergência, vistas como ventos poderosos de mudança, tais como formas de estar no mundo que oferecem espaço para aspirar-se ao mais-que-humano. Primeiramente, escuto os ecos e ressonâncias entre ecoperformance e formas autistas de estar no mundo, para então considerar como os estudos sobre deficiência podem contribuir com os da ecoperformance.

**Palavras-Chave:** Ecoperformance; Autismo; Neurodivergência; Deficiência; Ecologias Deficientes.

In her “Welcome Words” to the book *Ecoperformance*, Maura Baiocchi describes the term ecoperformance as a “breath-word,” a word that came “windy like a sea wave, an eagle’s song, and a wild horse’s mane” (Baiocchi, 2022, p. 8). In this article, I intertwine ecoperformance as a windy word with disability and neurodivergence envisioned as powerful winds of change, as ways of being in the world that offer breathing room to the more-than-human.

If disabled activist and artist Neil Marcus’ poem “The Metaphor of Wind in Cripple Poetics” opens with the line “How can I speak of cripple and not mention the wind” (apud Koppers, 2011, p. 25), it is similarly impossible for me to speak of ecoperformance without mentioning disability. I come to ecoperformance as an autistic butoh dancer, and my experience of ecoperformance is necessarily colored by the way in which I experience the world as an autistic person. In this paper, I first listen to the echoes and resonances between ecoperformance and autistic ways of being in the world, before considering what disability studies can bring to ecoperformance.

Writing on the concept of ecoperformance, Baiocchi emphasizes that “ecoperformative presence should not be confused with the aestheticized posing in front of decorative backdrops employed in some site-specific spectacles that only strive to aggrandize the aura of the artist” but is rather “conceived to be experienced as a dynamic process of interaction and mutual

immanence between the body of the performer and the forces and forms that compose the atmosphere of tensions characteristic of the performative environment” (“What is Ecoperformance?”). In Baiocchi’s vision, ecoperformance refuses to consider the human as the sole actor of a performance or as its center. This shares similarities with autistic writer Daina Krumin’s description of the way in which she experiences the world: “Most people attend to the voices above all else. I attend to everything the same way with no discrimination, so that the caw of the crow in the tree is as clear and important as the voice of the person I’m walking with” (apud Manning, 2013, p. 150).

Whereas for neurotypical individuals, the environment is often reduced to a background or a backdrop, a stage on which human interactions take place, autistic individuals emphasize that the environment exists on the same plane with human beings. As an autistic person, I have difficulties filtering “background noise” precisely because the sounds of the world refuse to keep the place that the dictionary assigns to them: that of “sounds that can be heard *behind* other sounds that are louder” (“Background noise” - emphasis mine). To me, it seems that ecoperformance is based on the recognition that the human voice is not always the loudest (and neither the most interesting) voice in the room, that the body does not dance in front of the environment but always *in* and *with* the environment. That the environment does not stay *back* or *behind*.

To return to the wind, Ralph Savarese states that, “To an autistic child, the wind in the birch trees is just as compelling as a friend’s comment on the playground” (Savarese, 2018, p. 44). Ecoperformance, then, might well be a breath-word that gives us permission to give as much attention to the wind as to the human voice.

In hir video *In My Language*, autistic activist Mel Baggs, who was nonspeaking, describes hir native language as “being in a constant conversation with every aspect of hir environment” and “[r]eacting physically to all parts of [hir] surroundings.” In Mel Baggs’ words, language becomes a capacious term, one that is not limited by and to neurotypical definitions, or bound to the human voice. Touching, smelling, tasting, feeling, sensing and dancing with the world become a language, one that does not need words. What constitutes a conversation is redefined in that process: whereas other human beings are often regarded as the preferred – if not the only – interlocutors by neurotypical individuals, Baggs states that sie regards the water and the rest of hir environment as not only valid but also valuable interlocutors. Baggs also highlights the irony in the fact that while people discuss hir natural way of interacting with hir environment as “being in a world of [hir] own”, people describe hir as “opening to true interaction with the world” precisely when sie conforms to neurotypical standards by reacting to a much more limited part of hir environment. Ecoperformance as a term that

acknowledges the interaction between the body and the forces of the environment seems to me as a term that can point to if not capture—because I believe that the logic of “capture” goes against what ecoperformance does—the kind of capacious relationship with the more-than-human described by Baggs.

In his 1943 essay “Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact,” Leo Kanner describes autistic children as displaying a “good relation to objects” (Kanner, 1943, p. 246) while deeming their relation to people much less satisfactory. That is, the autistic children Kanner wrote about did not display *more* interest for other human beings than for objects, which was deemed pathological. Kanner writes that “the people, as long as they left the child alone, figured about the same manner as did the desk, the bookshelf, or the filing cabinet” (Ibid, p. 246). As an autistic individual, I am left to wonder: why should people figure differently from the desk, the bookshelf, and the filing cabinet? Why should the human voice be heard above all sounds?

In their essay “Towards a Symbio-Scene,” Wolfgang Pannek and Maura Baiocchi condemn “[t]he instrumentalization of nature, the degradation of other life forms to a supporting role in the service of its human highness” (Pannek and Baiocchi, 2022, p. 125). What ecoperformance does, then, is to refuse a (neurotypical) vision of the world in which the human should figure differently from all other life forms.

Discussing autism as a mode of being, French educator, writer and filmmaker Fernand Deligny emphasizes the importance of the environment, of the place, of the *there* for autistic individuals.<sup>1</sup> Autistic gestures, in his writings, seem to be grounded in the *there* rather in the *for*. That is, they are gestures that respond primarily to the environment rather than to a “rational” or social purpose—at least if “rational” and “social” are to be understood in narrow and neurotypical terms, as the prerogative of neurotypical individuals. For Deligny, (nonspeaking) autistic individuals live “in the infinitive mode” (Deligny, 2016, p. 144), the infinitive being the only verbal form with “no subject to serve as the key to it all” (Ibid, p. 111). And it is the *topos*, the *there*, which allows the infinitive to *take place*. He writes:

To be even more simplistic, if to locate and to act are primordial infinitives, they are comparable to what it is for a duckling to swim.

If there is no water, the swimming in question does not manifest itself, owing to the lack of the essential “there,” and the duckling appears for what it is: poorly endowed for running and pecking the ground with its beak.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Deligny’s interest in autism pertained solely to “mute” autistic individuals, whom he regarded as existing outside language. While Deligny’s thinking on autism was ahead of its time, this aspect of his work appears dated. Indeed, progresses in assistive communication technology have shown that the distinction between “verbal” and “nonverbal” autism might not be as clear-cut—or relevant—as it once seemed. Furthermore, autistic individuals who would previously have been described as *nonverbal* have shown to rather be *nonspeaking*. Nevertheless, I believe Deligny’s work to be valuable whether or not one fully agrees with his views on the relationship between autism and language. In my (autistic) thinking, autistic individuals are not outside language as much as outside (neurotypical) language, outside language always-already understood *in* and *on* neurotypical terms. As such, this article puts Deligny’s writings in conversation with the works and words of autistic individuals—including my own—regardless of whether “their” autism corresponds to the definition of autism that Deligny had in mind.

All this to say that the primordial infinitives take place, as we say, only if the site – *topos* – allows for that to happen. (Ibid, p. 214)

The infinitive mode eludes the subject, the “I,” to emphasize that actions *take place*, that they do not stem from a subject, but arise in the tension between body and environment.

Writing on autistic perception, philosopher Erin Manning states that “for the autistic, to be in the world is to world, to experience the unfolding, in all of its complexity, of the comingling of all drops of existence” (Manning, 2013, p. 128). Elsewhere, she writes: “Autistic perception dances the environment, folding-through a seeing-feeling that does not delimit in advance the realm of experience” (Ibid, p. 178).

Working on ecoperformance, I co-create a(u/r)tistically with my partner Rolf Gerstlauer and with the environment: together, we world. In our ecoperformance films, the environment refuses to be a background. When (I) dance, when Rolf films, when we approach a landscape and when a landscape approaches us, when Rolf edits the video, the body merges with the landscape and the landscape merges with the body. Or rather, the cut between body and environment does not happen: the body is the landscape is the body is the landscape, dancing.

Manning states that for autistic individuals, “there is no clear separation between the body and the world. World and body are



startingly, painfully, exquisitely, processually one” (Ibid, p. 154). Autistic perception is at the core of Rolf’s and my eperformance work. To me, eperformance is precisely about dancing the environment in the way described by Manning. In fact, I believe autistic perception to be at the core of eperformance whether or not the work is created by autistic individuals. Indeed, as stated by Manning, “autistic perception does not belong exclusively to autistics” (Manning, 2016, p. 14).



Fig. 1 Screen capture from the film *Weird Drawn at Land*, photograph by Rolf Gerstlauer

Prior to discovering and connecting to eperformance, Rolf had spent years investigating what he termed “body and space morphologies,” that is, the relationship between body and space, bodies and bodies and body, space and space. Prior to discovering

and connecting to ecoperformance, I had spent years investigating butoh dance. “Ecoperformance” is a term that gives us space and permission to continue our a(u/r)tistic investigations at the crossroad of butoh and body and space morphologies. Ecoperformance, as a breath-word, offers us breathing room to engage with the world autistically. If ecoperformance echoes autistic ways of being in and sensing the world, I believe that ecoperformance can benefit from a sustained engagement with the work of disability studies scholars and activists that explore the ethics of living with impaired landscapes.

In her essay “Age of Disability: On living well with impaired landscapes,” disability studies scholar Sunaura Taylor introduces the concept of disabled ecologies, that is “the material and cultural ways in which disability is manifested and produced among human and nonhuman entities.” The terms “disability” and “impairment” allow Taylor to name consequences of environmental crises that are not limited to the human but extend to nonhuman entities and ecosystems. She writes:

Grappling with disabled ecologies helps us to recognize and resist ableism in this age of disability—the devaluing, the disgust, the disdain, and the abandonment leveled against those people and ecosystems who cannot attain or hold on to able-bodiedness and the fiction of independence it maintains. (Taylor, 2021)

I believe it is fundamental for ecoperformance to engage with disabled ecologies. This is, in part, what Rolf and I have attempted to

do in our ecoperformance work on the Lista peninsula<sup>2</sup>. Over the course of almost a decade, we have witnessed a land we love constantly being intervened on, trees in turn planted and cut down in the hope to “restore” it to some previous state. For Taylor,

Although movements for the environment have at times been fueled by anxieties about disability, they have also been stirred by the relational networks disability exposes and by the visions for the more humane society disability requires. That we are living in an age of disability is not said with pride, but with recognition that there are ways to transform, to find solutions, to center care, interdependency, and expansive visions of access—to create the conditions over the coming decades to learn from what disabled activists call “crip brilliance.” (Ibid)

In our work, Rolf and I turn to crip wisdom, to the vital insights coming from the disability community. Although this is not something which they necessarily name in their work, I see a trend of ecoperformance artists engaging with disabled ecologies. With this essay, I extend an invitation to them to engage with the concept of disability, to join us in thinking with disabled activists and thinkers.

Like Taylor, disability studies scholar Eli Clare explores the entanglement between disabled bodies and disabled ecologies. In his essay “Notes on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies and a Politics of Cure,” Clare meditates on the concepts of restoration and cure as they pertain to bodies and environments. For Clare, cure represents

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Rolf Gerstlauer and Julie Dind, “Cenotaph for Weird’s Well and T[h]ree Missing Bodies” in Wolfgang Pannek (ed.) *Ecoperformance*.

an “ideology seeped into every corner of Western thought and culture,” which “rides on the back of *normal* and *natural*” (Clare, 2017, p. 245). Examining the analogy between cure as the restoration of health and ecological restoration, Clare unveils “a fundamental illogic rooted in the white Western framework that separates human animals from nonhuman nature” (Ibid, p. 259), pointing to the differential treatment of the human and the nonhuman. That is, whereas the idea of a “normal” and “natural” body has been weaponized against disabled and otherwise minoritarian individuals, Clare points to the existence of “an out-of-control greed for and consumption of coal and trees, fish and crude oil, water and land,” a framework which “despises and destroys the *natural* when it is not human” (Ibid, p. 260). He calls for a “politics of cure [...] as messy and visceral as our bodies” (Ibid, p. 248). While cure or restoration can sometimes be desirable, Clare also points to instances in which restoration or cure might not be the answer. He writes: “Even though restoration as a process is never complete, it always requires an original or historical state in which to root itself, a belief that this state is better than what currently exists, and a desire to return to the original” (Ibid, p. 247). However, for many disabled individuals, there is no original, non-disabled body to return to. Clare writes: “The vision of me without trembling hands and slurred speech, with more balance and coordination, does not originate from my body’s history. Rather it arises from an imagination of what my body should be like, some

definition of *normal* and *natural*" (Ibid, p. 248). Similarly, as an autistic person, there is no non-autistic preexisting version of me. Ultimately, Clare's essay is a call:

I want us to tend the unrestorable places and ecosystems that are ugly, stripped down, full of toxins, rather than considering them *unnatural* and abandoning them. I want us to respect and embrace the bodies disabled through environmental destruction, age, war, genocide, abysmal working conditions, hunger, poverty, and twists of fate, rather than deeming them *abnormal* bodies to isolate, fear, hate, and dispose of. How can bodily and ecological loss become an integral conundrum of both the human and nonhuman world, accepted in a variety of ways, cure and restoration only a single response among many? (Ibid, p. 255)

Rather than offering easy answers, Clare invites us to engage with the messiness of questions of cure and restoration, and the loaded histories these concepts carry. Although this is not an easy task, I believe that ecoperformance can respond to his call, finding responses that go beyond cure and restoration and questioning the normative ideology behind these concepts.

At the crossroad of (eco)performance and disability, Petra Kuppers' work on eco soma offers methods to engage the complexity of the relationship between the body and the environment. She writes:

Eco soma sensing connects with materials, objects, and sites that one's moving body meets. I find that sometimes my moving self, in dancerly openness, can sense more or

differently that when I am immobile, even though (or maybe because) my disabled movement is painful. Eco soma sensing is interested in the kind of gaps and opportunities that open up when phenomenological awareness of being in the world encounters uncomfortable spaces. That discomfort opens up, for instance, when your cuddly blanket is made of water-threatening plastics whose tiny fibers might clog a fish's digestive system. Your own stomach contracts at the thought, even while you hold on to differences between your own gut and a fish's sensing. (Kuppers, 2022, p. 1)

Kuppers' eco soma work mobilizes performance and storytelling as ways of "undoing certainty, undoing boundaries, shifting into permeability" (Ibid, p. 151). She proposes "storytelling practices to change the story" (Ibid, p. 120) and "methods of multivoicing, of listening to the silences between voices and to the different textures and genres with which humans and nonhumans come to expression" (Ibid, p. 146). Kuppers' work is an invitation to explore the tensions between the (disabled) body and the world, and to dream different futures. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer emphasizes the importance of imagining futures that include disability. She states: "I, we, need to imagine crip futures because disabled people are continually being written out of the future, rendered as the sign of the future no one wants," adding "We must begin to anticipate presents and to imagine futures that include all of us. We must explore disability in time" (Kafer, 2013, p. 46). Kuppers' work provides minor methods and practices for us to start doing this work.

Lastly, I turn to the work of disability studies scholar Arseli Dokumacı on what she terms “micro-activist affordances.” Dokumacı states that “ecological survival under the macro, massive and overarching scale of planetary shrinkage” lies not in major interventions but rather “in the tiny, momentary, and earthly scale of affordance-creating” (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 252). She proposes that “The activist affordances that disabled people have long mastered can perhaps be a way of addressing the pressing question of how to negotiate a shrinking planet with diminishing resources, or provide a starting point for doing so” (Ibid, p. 252).

If I turn to the work of disability studies scholars and activists to think of ecoperformance, it is perhaps because their work focuses on the micro, on the minor, on the specific rather than proposing all-encompassing solutions and theories. I believe that ecoperformance, as a poet(h)ic form, finds the ethical and the political in the minor, in a(u/r)tistic gestures. Ecoperformance, if it engages disability, might well be the wind that moves us all—human and nonhuman—toward more livable futures.

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