Covert Plants: Vegetal Consciousness and Agency in an
Anthropocentric World

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Interview with Michael Marder

Prudence Gibson

Re-presentation

PG: There are plant artists around the world who are using the eco-transmissions of roots or leaves to create sound artworks. Other plant artists unground natural species from the earth and bring them into the gallery space or create experiences that disrupt or intervene with an ecological state. These bodies of work develop from the history of botanical illustration, gardening, bonsai care, and other art-aesthetic preoccupations, even land art. However, contemporary plant art consistently highlights eco-ethics, those moral questions of how to relate to plants. New information in plant science informs our understanding of status and ethics, as you expound in your books. These ideas are being taken up by artists and presented as a means of advocacy as well as a continued creative representation. Can you respond to this new realm of representation, as both a conceptual artistic interpretation but also as a way of ‘speaking for’ plants?

MM: Although I am by no means a Kantian, I am a little nostalgic for the strict division between the questions of epistemology, practical ethics, and aesthetics, reflected in the three Critiques. The advantage of treating these issues separately is that they can be imbued with as much clarity as possible before being interrelated, amalgamated, mixed, etc. Let’s take representation, for instance. Epistemologically, it refers to the framing of an object by a subject, using preexisting categories, schemas, and concepts. Ethically-politically, it means delegation (speaking on behalf of someone, as you
note), the supplanting of one subject or a group of subjects by another. Aesthetically, it implies a faithful recreation of a pre-given reality in a work of art in which the depicted objects would be recognizable as corresponding to a slice of the ‘outside world.’ So, representation, an essentially modern philosophical and aesthetic term, necessarily regulates the relation between subjects and objects or among subjects. That is where my patience with Kantianism, be it avowed or encrypted, runs out. I find the parameters of representation sorely deficient, especially with regard to plant life. I much prefer expression, so long as we understand the literal sense of this word—pressing outwards, albeit without the Romantic emphasis on interiority whence this movement proceeds—and detect in it the growing activity of the plants themselves. Artists might facilitate vegetal self-expression, or, at a certain meta-level, express this expression with the vegetal world. Should they attempt to do so, they would not run into the dead-end of ‘speaking for’ plants, which, in the name of ethics, may turn out to be highly unethical, precisely because the flora does not speak in anything like human languages. The advantage of expression is that, thanks to its spatial orientation (ex-, outwards), it can track the articulation of plants and plant parts as material, embodied significations. I repeat: expression allows us to track the articulation of plants, becoming a medium for their flourishing. And I’d love to see artists pick up this vegetal idea of expression without a hidden inner core, without depth.

A Terrible Mistake

PG: Staying with the idea of plant rights—while valid, are we taking a risk? Are we mistakenly relegating plants to the realm of mere innocents, as victims? How can we re-present plants and re-perform them in an art context without falling into the representational wormholes of conventional aesthetics?

MM: I would say that plants are beyond the categories of guilt and innocence. These are but human feelings and constructs projected onto the world around us. You are right to recall, of course, that conventionally, plants, especially flowers, served as the figures of innocence. But, despite all that, in practice, they were never in-
nocent enough: scapegoated, always burdened with our own guilt
or with the task of symbolizing our emotions—be they grief or
love. That is the logic of cuttability/culpability, signaled in Der-
rida’s Glas. Simply put, the presumably innocent flower had to
be cut, culled, detached from its living source, and sacrificed to a
reality higher than it. So, yes, in a sense, plants are the victims par
excellence, the absolute ‘bare life,’ not even recognizable as living.
In The Philosopher’s Plant, I call their status arbor sacra. Now,
when I invoke plant rights, I do so, on the one hand, to interro-
gate the very notion of rights and, on the other, to highlight the
so-called ‘moral considerability’ of plants. If we insist on resort-
ing to the discourse of rights with reference to people or animals,
then plants should be definitely included. If not, then a different
framework should be invented for regulating relations among liv-
ing beings.

Human–Plant Contradictions

PG: There are artists who hook up plants to all kinds of sensors
(light, thermal, gas, liquid) in order to create artworks. The in-
formation measured by the sensors, for example, is then used to
create sound or mobilise a tree in a gallery space or effect a dy-
namic change in the immediate environment or to stimulate au-
dience participation. My question is whether there is a problem
here, in treating plants as non-feeling subjects? Sticking probes
into tree trunks or affixed onto leaves and roots can cause dam-
age to the plants, perhaps even pain. Is it worth it? What are our
moral obligations, as artists and writers, to show vegetal respect?

Well, obviously, there would be a huge public outcry if this sort
of art was performed on a live rabbit or a dog, with electrodes
attached to its head, measuring brain waves, or to the heart, reg-
istering cardiac rhythms. That it seems okay to subject plants to
such a project is a sign of the insufficient change in our received
ideas that view them as insensitive beings or ‘non-feeling subjects’
as you say. That is definitely an ethical problem. But I also see
an epistemological problem here. The techniques you describe are
predicated on a belief in the possibility of a global and universal
translation. Everything can become meaningful only on our terms
and on our ground thanks to certain technological manipulations. The sensors attached to leaves, trunks, and roots definitely sense something, but, in the process, what vanishes is the sensing of the plants themselves. We can pat ourselves on our backs for deriving such ‘information’ from them, but as soon as it has become nothing but information, the plant has already disappeared. In a way, this is the general paradox of modern signification, where, unlike in expression, the signifier is ab initio detached from the signified. Artists can either keep replaying this frustrating record of total loss, masquerading as total transparency, or they can imagine ways to see, listen to, be, and think with plants otherwise.

Performativity

PG: The performativity of plants seems to refer to a state of being where they are not limited by functionality or utility. The attraction of a discourse in plant performativity is that it eschews conventions of immobility or inaction. It allows plant life a vitality, with or without human recording or observation. However, does this performativity of plants mark a slippage back into subject-object or human-plant dyads? What possibilities are there for a wider performativity where plant behaviour and conceptual art can meet on an equal plane?

MM: In a nutshell, the performativity of plants is their mode of being in the world— their affecting and being affected by the places of their growth. Plants are the artists of themselves: they create themselves and their environments all the time: losing parts and acquiring new ones, changing the landscape and the airscape, moulding themselves and their world through forms inseparable from vegetal matter. Though never complete so long as a plant is living and metamorphosing, this process has its intermediate ‘products,’ akin to stills taken from a film. These are the very identifiable self-expressions of vegetal life I have mentioned earlier. How can we approximate to, or resonate with, the moments of vegetal performativity? The possibilities are as numerous as they are still unexplored. For one, gesture can convey something of the language of plants, because it is an equally embodied and spatial kind of expression. For another—and I have written on this at
length elsewhere — artists can attempt to perform growth, which is a formidable challenge, so much so that I have called it ‘performing the unperformable.’ The artist who, to my mind, comes closest to such a performance is Špela Petrič with her piece ‘Confronting Vegetal Otherness,’ in which for 12 hours a day she cast a shadow on germinating cress. I cannot see how there can be a ‘slippage’ into any traditional dyads here, or in any other exercises in vegetal performativity for that matter, given the irreducible time-lag between the human and the plant: the wildly different time scales of movements, behaviors, or responses. (Even with regard to ourselves, a certain time-lag applies, in that our ‘involuntary’ bodily activity operates at a different level from that of explicit consciousness.) So long as more than one temporality is at play, we are in a situation of an encounter — with the other.

Anti-Metaphysics

PG: With reference to the possibility of ‘plant souls,’ if plants do not have aspirations beyond nourishment, habituation, and survival, might there be a strong case that art should not have to produce transcendent possibilities either? Art has long endured that impossible criterion of judgment: truth. Could the anti-metaphysical qualities of plant behaviour inform our cultural attitudes to art creation and art appreciation?

MM: I like the implicit suggestion that not only should art engage with plants but that it might also be, at its core, vegetal. It is true that we customarily think of aesthetic creation as one of the highest endeavors of human spirituality, a largely ethereal activity on the par with religion and philosophy. Within such a framework, plants provide nothing but material support (recently I have also questioned this ‘nothing but’; even the presumably dead plant-derived material support for art offers resistance and imposes on the artist an alien intentionality of its own): in painting — pigments for various colors and the canvas itself; in earlier cinema and photography — celluloid film; in music — the wooden bodies of instruments, such as a cello or a violin. In Heidegger’s terms, then, they often comprise the ‘thing aspect’ of the work of art, while the ‘work aspect’ is reserved for something other than vegetal
creation. Your idea would mean that plants are the body and soul of an artwork, its form and content, the work and the thing. That would, indeed, be art at its most material, albeit not materialist, and at its most affirmative.

Three Axes

PG: In your essay in The Green Thread, you mention that there is a tendency in philosophy to ignore the outgoing in favour of the incoming (even when it is a non-arrival). When considering plants, there is not this cutting off or displacement from the source, but a continuous growing or possibility. Your three axes of the event unfolding are excrescence (how plants appear), expectation (waiting for germination), and exception (where seeds are extracted for the closed circuit of potentiality and are committed to chance). These three elements strike me as being useful vegetal processes to apply to the creation and experience of art. Artists create works or performances that are viewed (have an appearance), they await a response from the audience, or critics, or peers, in a state of hiatus. Finally artists’ works are removed from the live experience or real appearance and can be re-performed or re-told or re-experienced via video documentation and reviews etc. This final phase of how the artworks can continue to grow falls into your final axis of becoming committed to chance. Can you comment on drawing a link between your concept of the three axes with art? Where might the act of creating art sit within the realm of plant life?

MM: Again, I agree with your extension of my vegetal thought to art. It is important to highlight here that we are circling back to the issue of expression as a pressing outwards characteristic of growth, or excrescence. Without a hint of idealism, expression is how artworks grow and make their appearance in the world. A spatial process, it requires time to unfold and mature (expectation). And, moreover, there is no ‘cookie-cutter’ recipe for a good or successful vegetal-artistic expression, because, in each case, its spatiality and temporality are singular (exceptional), as it hinges on who or what is growing in it. As for your broader question about the place of art, I would like to propose a variation on my defini-
tion of philosophy as ‘sublimated plant-thinking.’ Art, in turn, is sublimated plant-sensing. Aesthesis, at the root of sensation and aesthetics, is not the exclusive province of animals and humans; as we know, plants are highly receptive to a variety of environmental factors, from light and moisture gradients to vibrations. To be sure, plants neither think nor see in images, but this does not mean that they neither think nor see. The ‘imageless presence’ of music Adorno praised in his aesthetic theory is one intimation of sublimated plant-sensing. I trust that you will find many others as well.

Plant-Time

PG: You have said ‘To live out of season in a way that is characteristic of humanity in modernity is to ignore the alterations and alternations of planetary time and to exist out of tune with the milestones of vegetal temporality.’ This question of plant-time is important for humans in order to reassess the way we relate to the environment, both natural and unnatural. The role of art has historically been to disrupt, to reveal, and to politicise. Is there some way artists can learn from plant-time, to adjust and change our relationship with other species and one another? Can artists bring attention to these temporal issues and contribute to the ‘long now’ where we need to politically and socially plan for the future, free from short-term gratifications?

MM: I actually think that only very recently has the role of art been ‘to disrupt, to reveal, and to politicize.’ Throughout its history, art has been rather inseparable from religion and, later on, from the wealthy or powerful patrons who commissioned specific works, usually for their own aggrandizement. There is nothing wrong with nurturing the political dimension of art; the aesthetic endeavor simply cannot begin with and be motivated purely by politics. If it does, it becomes propaganda, rather than art, regardless of how progressive the message. How is all this related to the time of plants? Through the experience of patience. Vegetal temporalities are quite distinct from our lived time because they are much slower, proceeding at paces or rhythms that remain largely imperceptible to us due to the inevitable time lag separating us from plants. Thus, we can either gas fruit into ripeness or patient-
ly await its own temporality to do its work. Patience is, therefore, an attitude most respectful toward the time of plants. When you wish to intervene, ethically or politically, by means of art in a particularly problematic reality, patience is lacking. This is especially the case today when rage and indignation are the political sentiments du jour. I am afraid that such fast interventions often make for bad art, while good art is often not ‘on time’ to create any meaningful difference. I am not saying that we, whether artists or non-artists, should not intervene into the horrible and deepening injustices we witness all around us. It is, actually, indispensable to intervene, albeit with patient hopelessness. This is a paradox that is theoretically irresolvable, an antimony of political aesthetics, if you will. Note that I say it is theoretically irresolvable; practically, however, a resolution is possible and in fact necessary in every concrete instance of artistic engagement. Patience is never infinite; it is bound to run out sooner or later, and the important thing is to let it run out at the right (ripe) moment when hopelessness itself becomes creative calmly and almost vegetally, not with the animality of Nietzsche’s ressentiment. Just as an almond tree monitors the increase of daylight, warmth, etc., before initiating the decision to blossom, so an artist should let expression grow and develop until the process is interrupted by an act it has been preparing all along.

Hiddenness

PG: In *Plant-Thinking* you discuss the hiddenness of plants. This is a reference to their vitality and complexity. Do you ever wonder if Plant Studies, emerging from Animal Studies, might bring too much attention to the relevance of plants? Are those of us interested in raising the status of plants ready for the fallout? Should they remain hidden from us?

*MM:* Let us not conflate two types of hiddenness: the provisional and the permanent. I take it that your questions refer to provisional hiddenness, which can be dispelled so long as you put that which is hidden in the spotlight or under a magnifying glass. So, we can shed more and more light on the capacities of plants, learn incredible things about them, and that will inevitably give rise to sensationalist media articles and tons of academic research. As a result,
plants will gradually stand out from the blurry backgrounds of our existence, coming into the open. Admittedly, I have this kind of hiddness in mind as well in my work on vegetal philosophy. But the other kind is more important for me. What do I mean by ‘permanent hiddness’? Certainly not the noumenal reality of the thing-in-itself, forever inaccessible to us, even if the experience of the world from the standpoint of a plant is, in part, that. What I mean, instead, is the constant allegiance of phutoi to phusis, of plants to nature, the nature that, as Heraclitus put it, loves to hide—to encrypt itself in its very appearances. Permanent hiddness is not the same as absence or lack; it is the shadow that makes light what it is and enables vision. It is not the same as inaccessible depth, for example, of the source, whence the ‘ex-’ of excrescence stems; on the contrary, it is the very superficiality of the surface, or, as we say in phenomenological jargon, the appearing itself that does not appear in any of the appearances. Whenever one invokes plants, at best, one arrives at frozen snapshots of a metamorphosis alluding to, yet also concealing, the time and being of plants. To sum up: permanent hiddness is of a temporal and ontological nature—it will be unaffected by any degree of attention we pay to plants.

Writing

PG: Should we adapt the way we write about plants to accord with the thoughtfulness and regenerative qualities of plant life?

MM: Absolutely! I have tried to do so, without any methodological planning really, together with Luce Irigaray in our co-authored book Through Vegetal Being (Columbia University Press, 2016). It was but a beginning of plant writing, briefly outlined in the book’s epilogue. Patience plays an important role here, as does absolute openness to the other. Connected to this, I always wonder how to give my writing back to plants. My dream for Plant-Thinking was to embed seeds into its covers and to urge readers to bury the book after it has been read, letting it decompose and germinate. Publishing conventions did not permit me to realize it. In The Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness, which is a beautiful collaboration with French artist
Anaïs Tondeur, writing and thinking constantly revert back to plants and to art in the shadow of a disaster. My blog, The Philosopher’s Plant, is an offshoot of the book with which it shares its title. The development of both—at the level of form and of content—is quite vegetal. But, no doubt, more needs to be done, boldly and experimentally, to invent a way of writing that would respond and correspond to plant life, which means grow, decay, and metamorphose like plants, without freezing into a method.

Anthropocentrism

PG: In my own research and writing, I have used your framework of ‘plant-thinking’ to actively investigate the interaction between plant philosophy, plant science, and plant art as a field of reciprocal understanding, possibility, and creative urgency. Plant Studies emerges from Animal Studies and draws attention to conventions of human exceptionalism. Can we ever escape this human-centred point of view or merely obscure its centrality by focusing on another species?

MM: People often do not understand that I do not ‘use’ plants as a foil for some extraneous issues such as human exceptionalism. And I do not ‘do’ Plant Studies, unless that means (tongue-in-cheek) studying like a plant or letting plants study you. I am interested in the ontology of vegetal life, in which I have discovered—I believe—a singular universal, a unique mode of existence that informs existence as such. And I am motivated to refashion thinking and acting on the basis of this singular universality, which has nothing to do with the abstract universal position arrogated by humans to themselves. For me, plants are not just another biological kingdom, and specific plants—not mere representatives of a given species. They are, as I have written on a few occasions, the synecdoche of what we automatically call ‘nature’ without realizing what we are talking about. Synecdoche is a rhetorical device, whereby a part stands in for the whole, in which it is ensconced. Plants are a part of nature that stands in for all of it. That is singular universality! I do not know what remains of anthropocentrism once you thoroughly contemplate the implications of this move. I hope not much, but that, in any event, is not my main preoccupation.
Fig. 1. Gadgur (phonetically [gadgu:ɹ]) tree ‘Long-fruited Bloodwood’, or *Eucalyptus polycarpa*, opposite The Oaks motel in Broome. Photo by the author.