

PLANTS
KNOW
WORLDS,
THEY
CONTAIN
WORLDS
AND THEY
MAKE
WORLDS.

EXHIBITION

But fortunately or unfortunately – depending on your point of view – ideas, however illogical, often prove very tenacious in men’s [sic] minds

– Arthur Galston and Clifford L. Slayman, *The Not-So-Secret Life of Plants*, 1979

CATEGORY COLLAPSE

The idea of a consciousness equivalent to our own, in-dwelling in a non-human other, is fundamentally unsettling. At least since Aristotle, humans have promoted the idea of themselves at the top of a hierarchy of existence of living beings, an assumption automatically relegating all others beneath us. Across many versions of the ‘Great Chain of Being’, distinctions were made based on the other’s perceived degree of capacity for self-awareness, perception, mobility, and ability to respond to and express control over their environments. Plants usually end up, in such taxonomical efforts, beneath humans and animals, but above minerals – living organisms, in other words, but without sentience, without consciousness; without agency.

At the same time, however, other humans have also – stubbornly, illogically, romantically, intuitively, but also consistently – contested the idea of plants as unfeeling, inert objects, insisting instead on thinking of plants as intelligent, sensitive beings; in other words, as agential. Since the earliest years of the last century at least, the notion that plants might sense and influence their worlds (and thus, by extension, ours), became an idea of some fixation. The exploration of this fuelled countless experiments over the last century as scientists and enthusiastic amateurs alike sought to test, demonstrate and prove the existence of plant sentience. Concomitantly, this has created awareness of the invisible but critical role of microorganisms, who not only share but also enable our human lives.

It is now widely known that the vast proportion of cells within a human body are not human but microbial; that to be human is to be part-microbe. We are now at the point where many hard-and-fast distinctions are greying, becoming indefensible, leaving in their wake a tangle of interspecies engagements to be considered, and intellectual positions to be rethought. After all, what is the sense in insisting on human specificity? What is the value in doggedly defending our hierarchical apogee – if, as humans, we are all made of non-human material?

Why Listen to Plants? at RMIT Design Hub – an exhibition and program of talks, workshops and performances – begins with the question of non-human agency.

The exhibition component is framed by the infamous 1978 film, *The Secret Life of Plants*, directed by Walon Green. Based on the hugely influential and wildly problematic 1973 book of the same name by Christopher Bird and Peter Tompkins, the film version presents a narrative of plant emotion and perception which, in 2018, remains as affective and captivating as it is methodologically unsound. The 1973 text shaped the history of plant research. Its runaway public success was followed by extensive debunking, carried out publicly, systematically and somewhat righteously by outraged members of the ‘proper’ scientific community, such as in the concerted efforts of Galston and Slayman, whose weary quote heads this piece.

Galston and Slaymen weren’t to know it, but as they were preparing their piece for publication, the documentary version of *The Secret Life of Plants* was in production, preparing to cause yet another set of seismic popular and scientific shockwaves. Scientifically, the effect of the film was to compound the damage caused by the book, and drive ‘legitimate’ plant intelligence research into near-extinction for the better part of four decades. In popular culture, however, the effect was the exact opposite; the wide public distribution and broadcast of the film, featuring interviews, footage and re-enactments of a host of plant perception experiments (complete with a moody soundtrack by Stevie Wonder) served to extend its ideas further and deeper into the public mind. Like an unkillable weed, the film’s frequent rotation over early 1980s public broadcasting systems across the West virtually guaranteed the implantation and propagation of a tenacious idea across a generation: that of plants as sentient beings.

Kalle Hamm and Dzamil Kamanger’s *Garden of Invasive Alien Species* channels the sounds of four common and maligned Nordic weeds into an electronic audiovisual composition. Long-time collaborators Kamanger and Hamm deliberately echo the recording methods developed by Indian polymath Jagadish Bose in the early 20th century and extended by Ivan Gunar in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, as described in both book and film versions of *The Secret Life of Plants*, in which sensitive technical apparatus measures and relays the electrophysiology of plants in a form

audible to human ears. Hamm and Kamanger’s work is thus a double recuperation: of techniques associated with canonical plant-listening, and of the politically silenced marginal plants that are the film’s speaking subject.

Scott Mitchell’s *Soothsayers* also directly references these prior non-human listening experiments through an apparatus harnessing local but imperceptible environmental energies into human-readable forms. Mitchell uses natural and human-constructed objects as antennae to sense, respond to and relay specific earth energies. Native grass, a Melbourne Bitter beer can and the Design Hub building are presented not as inert objects but rather as agents of nature, culture and pedagogy, listening and allowing us to listen when we connect with them. Transforming these familiar forms into sensitive instruments, Mitchell makes them ‘speak’ in the frequencies of electro-magnetic resonance, always already potential and complicit.

Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen’s *Reclaiming Vision* offers a very different approach and perspective on the agency and subjectivity of non-human others. Unlike Mitchell and Hamm/Kamanger, whose work presents more or less ‘raw’ signals of non-humans, this ‘nature fiction film’ eschews scientific objectivism and literality in its documentary representation of microbial life. Instead, the artists, working with microorganisms from Oslo’s brackish Akerselva (Aker River) and algae cultures grown by university biologists, chose to ‘narrativise’ the interactions of these tiny creatures with each other and with traces of human activity, including the scourge of microplastics, in their environment. Supported by Henry Vega’s lively soundtrack, the artists construct a ‘psychomarine ecology’, a form of psychogeography for the sea in which hidden structures, histories and forces glimpsed in microscale offer a microcosm of larger urgent questions arising from the interrelation of lifeforms on our planet.

Jenna Sutela, also working microbially, introduces us to the idea of the holobiont, an entity composed of multiple, inseparable, co-evolved entities. Biological units organised from numerous microbial symbionts, holobionts challenge and supplant normative human hierarchical dominance, instead offering the shape of another order, in which the human body is regarded in a state of constant re-integration in its variously and simultaneously organic-synthetic surrounding environment(s). Sutela’s film establishes a ground for considering existence as a set of nested

worlds – the kind of simultaneous co-existence science philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1929) describes in which ‘(each) actual entity is a throb of experience including the actual world within its scope’.

A crucial plant in Zheng Bo’s ongoing exploration of weeds as a social allegory for human difference, ferns are, for the artist, a symbol of the forgotten, the overlooked and the marginalised in society, particularly queer people. In *Pteridophilia 1*, his queering of the nature documentary form, filmed in the lush mountain forests of Taiwan, nubile young men caress and cavort with subtropical fern species. Referring to both the fern craze of the Victorian era (Pteridomania) and the rustling in the bushes characterising the semi-public sexual encounters of a gay beat, the film uses fetish to suggest possible intimacies born of mutual marginality and interspecies erotic exchange.

Finally Katie West, a Yindjibarndi woman who grew up on Noongar Yued *boodja* (country), offers us a meditation in which to reset and reimagine our relationship with nature through the examination of colonisation as a metaphoric, as well as political process. In *Decolonist*, West generates a pictorial and imaginative space of overlap between radically unaligned but not incommensurate multidimensional worlds of colonial and Indigenous thought. As her hypnotic voice-over guides us to “slowly unlearn what we have been taught”, the tantalising slit at the centre of West’s teeming field of post-natural abstraction suggests less of a void and more of an endlessly contingent and self-renewing screen onto which human and other desires may be projected.

Danni Zuvela
Co-Artistic Director
Liquid Architecture
November 2018

LIST OF WORKS

1. Walon Green (US), *The Secret Life of Plants*, 1978, Paramount Pictures, 1:37mins
2. Zheng Bo (HK), *Pteridophilia*, 2016, colour, sound, 17:00mins
3. Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen (NE/NO), *Reclaiming Vision*, 2018, colour, sound, 27:00mins
4. Kalle Hamm and Dzamil Kamanger (FI), *Garden of Invasive Alien Species*, 2013, colour, sound, 13:30mins
5. Jenna Sutela (FI), *Holobiont*, 2017, colour, sound, 10:30mins
6. Katie West, *Decolonist*, 2016, colour, sound, 5:00mins
7. Scott Mitchell, *Soothsayers*, 2018, Feather Spear-grass (*Austrostipa elegantissima*), 1987 Melbourne Bitter can, RMIT Design Hub, amplification and radio circuits, Software Define Radio, monitors, EMF, size variable

Why Listen to Plants? 22.11–08.12.2018 Liquid Architecture x Design Hub

RMIT Design Hub is pleased to launch *Why Listen to Plants?* – an exhibition and program of events presented with Liquid Architecture. Liquid Architecture began as an RMIT student-led sound art festival and has evolved into one of the most important Australian organisations supporting practitioners working with sound. Like Design Hub, Liquid Architecture engages with various modes of research and forms of collaboration to develop their annual programming, and so it has been a fruitful experience to co-present a program drawing from the realms of art, design, science and music.

Why Listen to Plants? is part of a long-term inquiry into listening to ‘non-human’ others, led by Liquid Architecture co-Director Danni Zuvela. *Why Listen to Plants?* asks what can we learn from plants and their alliances with other organisms, such as bees, fungi and microbes? How do these interactions play out and what might they tell us about human and non-human relationships? This research is inherently multi-disciplinary and so reflects our remit at Design Hub to visualise and perform creative research practices across the vast terrain of enquiry that orbits our gallery spaces. The program takes us into many, diverse spheres of thinking – from the mathematical capabilities of bees to the social life of algae to the ‘speech modes’ of plants. It is ultimately an experiment in reframing plant/human relationships and explores a question that is surely central to the very future of our existence.

Why Listen to Plants? is curated by Danni Zuvela, co-presented by Liquid Architecture and RMIT Design Hub

Liquid Architecture: Danni Zuvela, Joel Stern, Georgia Hutchison, Debris Facility

RMIT Design Hub: Kate Rhodes, Nella Themelios, Erik North, Timothy McLeod, Layla Cluer, Michaela Bear, Ari Sharp, Simon Maisch, Gavin Bell, Jessica Woods

Graphic Design: No Clients (Samuel Heatley, Robert Janes, Ned Shannon, Beazyt Worcou)

Special thanks: Elena Betros Lopez, Michael Bojowski, Timothy Coster, Bella Hone-Saunders

LIQUID ARCHITECTURE is an Australian organisation for artists working with sound. LA investigates the sounds themselves, but also the ideas communicated about, and the meaning of, sound and listening. Liquid Architecture is supported by City of Melbourne, City of Yarra, Creative Victoria, and the Australia Council for the Arts.

NO CLIENTS is a Melbourne based practice for design who take a collaborative approach, working with activists, artists, architects, curators, designers, editors, publishers, writers and those invested in engaging with a critical dialogue about their own work and its broader cultural sphere.

RMIT DESIGN HUB is a progressive educational environment. It houses a community of architects, designers, curators and students for collaborative, interdisciplinary design research and education within a purpose-built, ten-story building that also includes RMIT University’s School of Architecture and Urban Design and the Design Archives.

LOCATION

RMIT Design Hub
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SPECIAL SUMMER OPENING HOURS

Tuesday, Thursday: 12 – 6PM
Wednesday, Friday: 12 – 9PM
Saturday: 12 – 5PM
Closed Sunday and Monday

RMIT University acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

CONTENT WARNING

Why Listen to Plants? contains nudity and adult themes that may cause offence and may be inappropriate for children.

DISCLAIMER

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