

TRUST ME I'M AN ARTIST: THE CONUNDRUM OF PLANT LIFE

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See <<http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>> for supplemental files associated with this issue.

Submitted: <December 2015>

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Abstract

Skotopoiesis was the first event from the series *Confronting Vegetal Otherness* within which I explore novel plant-human relationships beyond the limits of empathy, interfaces and language. The 19-hour performance was my attempt at intercognition with germinating cress, using my body's shadow as a sign of human presence. Upon the conclusion of the performance, an ethical committee gathered as a part of the *Trust Me I'm an Artist* series examined the work and was challenged to consider the ethics of including plant life in artworks as well as to assess our attitude towards plants in general.

Keywords: plants; ethics; intercognition; bioart; performance

In lieu of artists' increasing interest in the manipulation of living as such, *Trust Me I'm an Artist* (TMIAAA) is a series of discursive interventions during which an *ad hoc* ethical committee gathers to review a particular artist's project or practice within which certain ethical boundaries might be breached [1]. Thus TMIAAA encourages experts from various relevant fields (scientists, ethicists, philosophers etc.) to consider the specific context of the work of art when advising authors on their course of action and by doing so to help them realize projects which would, if judged solely by prevalent utilitarian and cautionary principles, be dismissed as unacceptable. This particular session, however, did not deal with a topic considered controversial – quite the opposite – plants are deemed an ethically acceptable substitute for other “higher” life forms when performing experiments in science. A similar attitude is expressed by the public, which, in stark contrast to animals, hardly thinks to object to the use of plants in art installations and performances. In this case the dismissal of the need for ethical justification is symptomatic of a highly biased view on life; although biologically relevant (preferring animals means protecting one's genealogical kin), in light of the interdependency of living beings and the fluidity of their becoming in (deep) time, this premise must be questioned. Moreover, holding on to speciesism is in denial of the present development of methods to genetically alter, grow *in vitro*, substitute and shape life, including our own biological substratum.

Despite a growing number of worrisome consequences that are the result of treating non-humans as manipulable material in excess, anthropocentric premises stemming from Cartesian binaries still instruct the ways the west engages with plants, resulting in our inability to break through the human subject – plant object normativity [2]. The crux of the problem is perhaps not ignorance; it might be a harbinger of a need to revise the very metaphysical underpinnings, which construe our reality. Vegetation indeed lacks autonomy, individuality, essentiality, self-identity and originality – traits which are necessary for western philosophical tradition to take a being into ethical consideration – yet precisely because of this insufficiency it also embodies a living reversal of metaphysical values and points toward the collapse of hierarchical dualisms [3].

Yet vegetal beings pose another conundrum to our desire to treat them ethically: when faced with plant life, empathy, our inborn vanguard of ethos, fails. Empathy is the emotion of

feeling into another, drawing upon personal experiences to imagine what it must be like for another. Vegetal ontology is alien to humans, which prevents us from establishing a legitimate empathic relationship with them, because, as Michael Marder points out, “the feeling of empathy with plants disregards their mode of being and projects the constructs and expectations of the human empathizer onto the object of



empathy.” [4]

Fig. 1. Cress germinating during the performance *Skotopoiesis*. (© Špela Petrič. Photo: Špela Petrič.)

To overcome the apparent void between plant and human agency, many artists have relied on interfaces to uncover hidden processes occurring in plants (reviewed in [5]). Though informing, interfaces might inadvertently misplace plant agency or lead to its misinterpretation, since they tend to evoke empathy towards plants based on varying degrees of anthropomorphism. When applying a machine to perceive the vivaciousness of plant life on our terms, beyond the long lost evolutionary connection, we are in essence interacting with an interface, an action so commonplace we hardly comprehend the materiality and processuality of the agency hiding behind the electrodes, computers and digital snapshots. Besides this, many artists covertly admit to not knowing which part of the signal is in fact noise, making it difficult to claim that the artworks stay true to the plants. Taken together, I recognized the caveat of interfaces as unintentionally promoting further reification of vegetal beings. The question then became, if not through interfaces, how *can* we experience plants beyond the mundane?

Having, as an artist, the prerogative to failure as a form of success, I challenged myself to transgress the interface by its omission - to assess how insights of plant neurobiology, phytocentrism, biosemiotics, and biophilosophy play out in a staged, effortful, visceral proximity of plants and humans where the medium of interaction resides within the native perceptual milieu of both parties [6]. I coined the term intercognition to avoid words such as relationship, interaction or comprehension, richly colonized with anthropocentric meaning, to describe the process of reciprocal perception.

Intercognition relies on the integration of meaningful signs in the cognitive structure of a particular organism, without presuming what the experience ‘is like’ for each entity. The instigation of this cross-species mutual perception is a testing ground for a practical ethic towards plants that employs unusual relativities to make a case for the complex conglomerate of incompatibilities to be overcome and congruencies to be recognized when rethinking our relationship to plant life.

Skotopoiesis (meaning shaped by darkness) was the first performance from the series attempting plant-human inter cognition. On 10th and 11th September 2015 in Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, the germinating cress and I faced each other for 19 hours, illuminated by a projection light (Fig. 1 and 2). As the cress grew pale and elongated in an attempt to escape my shadow and grow into the light, I was shrinking due to losing fluid from the intervertebral disks. The physical changes induced in the plants and myself presented the material, observable evidence of inter cognition.

Fig. 2. The artist standing still and throwing a shadow onto cress during *Skotopoiesis*. (© Miha Fras. Photo: Miha Fras.)



During the performance I took a short break every hour to stretch, eat, go to the toilet and take care of my animal needs. After the initial 12-hour stillness, I turned off the lights and took a 10-hour break to sleep. While standing, I conversed with the audience; the only requisite being I hold my body so that the shadow I was casting remained in the same position. Most of the time, the visitors took a quick glance, absolving “nothing was happening” and walking out. Some asked about the intention of the project, which often compelled them to share interesting facts about plants. The few that did choose to spend some time beside the cress could connect to the endeavor based on a personal experience.

In *Skotopoiesis*, I was playing the human, an individual insisting to be recognized, imposing my being onto the subjectivity of numerous (estimated at 400.000) cress seedlings. Though presumably (pointed out by one of the members of the committee would insist) the cress seedlings could not distinguish between a human being from a cardboard cutout in the same shape, at which level and to which extent did I, the human, really *know* the cress I was observing?

Thinking about plant ethics is difficult; Karen Barad suggests performativity as the authentic cross-agential discursive plane [7], which I was hoping to realize through *Skotopoiesis*. During the performance, my provisional ethics followed a strange (and admittedly questionable) economy of mutual suffering to legitimize the subjugation of cress seedlings. The 19-hour commitment to active inactivity was my way of surrendering to the plant. The public was able to observe the forced effort of the cress and the artist, but was also intentionally excluded from the process, which proceeded at a pace incompatible with our contemporary experience. The cress

germinated in an artificial environment devoid of natural light, soil, rain, under a relatively weak and partially obstructed light. Its destiny was preordained when shipped in small packets intended for human consumption. In fact, my instruction to the gallery was that cress be harvested and eaten following the performance. Instead, the carpet was rolled up and thrown away, once again demonstrating the difficulty of substituting the usual pragmatism for a (taxing?) ethic towards plants.

The session of the ethical committee [8] was quite anticlimactic, without heated discussions over safety, abuse or dignity as you might expect at panels on ethics. Instead, the debate was focused on the known and unknown inner workings of plants, for example do they have an intelligence, an intentionality, do they respond or react to the environment, are they merely machinic or do they possess an inner world? A significant part of the discussion was searching the plant being for values we are committed to. Their intrinsic worth, perhaps the least palpable, was not addressed.

In conclusion, and perhaps paradoxically, *Skotopoiesis* and the accompanying *Trust Me I'm an Artist* session were not as plant-centered as it might have appeared at first glance. They weren't an instruction on how to behave ethically towards vegetal beings and least of all were they patronizing to the indifference with which we perceive the green backdrop of our existence. They were an interrogation of the philosophical substructure so naturalized we hardly realize we are acting on it when we decide how to act towards the Other. In a time of mass animal, plant and human migrations, induced by climate change (areal changes), global interconnectedness (invasive species) or war (refugee crisis), awareness and acceptance of the plurality of modes of being becomes more important than ever. The case of plant ethics is a poignant example of how steep a challenge we face and how misplaced our reliance on empathy might be.

References and Notes

1. Trust Me, I'm an Artist: Developing Ethical Frameworks for Artists, Cultural Institutions and Audiences Engaged in the Challenges of Creating and Experiencing New Art Forms in Biotechnology and Biomedicine in Europe is supported by funding from Creative Europe and is a collaboration between Waag Society, Brighton and Sussex Medical School, The Arts Catalyst, Ciant, Kapelica Gallery, Medical Museion, Capsula and Leonardo/Olats. The lead artist on the project is Anna Dumitriu and the lead ethicist is Professor Bobbie Farsides. More about the project can be found at <<http://trustmeianartist.eu/>>.
2. Matthew Hall, "Dogma and Domination: Keeping Plants at a Distance," in Harold Coward, ed., *Plants as Persons* (State University of New York, NY: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2010).
3. Michael Marder, "Vegetal Anti-Metaphysics: Learning from Plants", *Continental Philosophy Review* 44, No. 4, (Fall 2011) pp. 469-489.
4. Michael Marder, "'The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 51, No. 2, (June 2012) pp. 259-273.
5. Florian Weil (2014), "Artistic Human Plant Interfaces," master thesis <http://masterthesis.derhess.de/final/FlorianWeil_HumanPlantInterfaces_thesis.pdf>, accessed 8 November 2015.
6. For more information on the series *Confronting Vegetal Otherness* visit <<http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>>
7. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, No. 3, (Spring 2003) pp. 801 - 831
8. The members of the Ethics Committee who met for this discussion were: Monika Bakke, a philosopher, a specialist in art-science relations (and especially the plant-human relationship); Aljoša Kolenc, philosopher and psychoanalyst; Michael Marder, a philosopher, and plant ethical specialist; and Rüdiger Trojok, a biologist, engaged in a civic approach to science and DIY. The recording of the session can be accessed at <<https://soundcloud.com/user-610431938>>