

THE MANY MEANINGS OF

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University of
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Auditorium
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An interdisciplinary
conference

ORA

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Re-Evaluating
the Aesthetics
and Politics
of Plants



Sektion I: Ecological Memories

(Anita Hosseini & Isabel Kranz)

Clelia Coussonnet

There is no Silence in the Earth – Curatorial approach to Botanical Politics

There is no Silence in the Earth, a verse by Emily Dickinson, reminds us of the agency of soil, of how its manifold ecosystems act towards life processes, fostering germination, blooming and exchange. Conversely, imperial, colonial and capitalist societies have decreed their voices to be the strongest and muffled Earth's hums, imprinting lasting forms of contamination on the vegetal, mineral and aquatic. The supposed passivity of other than humans has been raised as safe conduct for all sorts of appropriation and exploitation. Committed artistic research-creation and field practices resist such narratives and contribute to shedding light on the intricacy of the political and economic domination of plants and resources. Such projects—which this contribution presents—unveil how power relations imposed on flora have resulted in the loss of precious knowledge and remedies, and in the alteration of system of meanings and of relationships of alliance with ecosystems. Yet, these transdisciplinary approaches also emphasise resistance patterns in botany and carve space for ecological memory, mobilising intimate and collective counternarratives. Contemporary art on botanical politics shifts perspectives about plants and stories we think we know, but can learn to look at differently.

Bethan Hughes

An Elastic Continuum, 2025, Lecture-performance

Emerging out of her ongoing artistic-research project Hevea, in this lecture-performance Hughes explores the material and symbolic transformations of a rubber-producing plant better known as the Qazaq (Kazakh) or Russian Dandelion.

From the Tien Shan mountains in Kazakhstan to collective farms across the Soviet Union, greenhouses at Auschwitz to laboratories funded by multinational tyre corporations in the European Union, the story of the Kazakh dandelion is not only one of resource extraction and forms of gendered labour but a study of how our understandings of plants are constructed through images and language.

Describing both the political and economic imperialisms by which the plant is transformed and her own encounters in breeding facilities, research laboratories, herbaria, mountain valleys, and national archives, Hughes pulls on the flexible thread that binds people and plants in regimes of power.

Through use of written testimonies, archival material, and video footage, *An Elastic Continuum* centres the perspectives of the women whose labour was and still is used to cultivate the Kazakh dandelion. In doing so, it aims to present a counter narrative to the objectification and gendered violence inherent to extractive regimes.

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll
Longer Botanical Drifts

The cultural history of plants and their reception by humans is as long as their interaction. Taking an acupunctural approach to particular moments of plant precedence, this paper reviews times in which the power of plants becomes particularly potent, whether for medical, economical, spiritual or political/environmental reasons. The plants may be seen to be taking different positions in human knowledge production. The recent shift to observing the plants agency in such processes of reception may redefine also the deeper historical appearances of plants and their power over humans. Looking especially at visual and discursive histories this author takes her 'botanical drift' model (2017) and expands it to consider what is left outside the frame of decolonial floral aesthetics and aesthetics. Looking at some protagonists, for instance orchids, it reaches for a theory based on longer histories.

Keynote

(Anita Hosseini & Isabel Kranz)

Maria Thereza Alves

Seeds of Change. Memory of Earth, Plants, and other Histories

My work *Seeds of Change* is an ongoing investigation based on original research of ballast flora in port cities of Europe. Since 1999, projects were developed for Marseille, Reposaari, Dunkirk, Exeter / Topsham, Liverpool, Bristol, Antwerp as well as New York City. Based on the available research materials, each iteration leads me to different paths of investigations on ballast and ballast flora, and can take different forms, including installations and ballast gardens. I came to see plants as witnesses, not only to trade and travel, but also to invasions, massacres, enslavement, immigration, war, and real estate development.

Material such as stones, earth, sand, wood, bricks and whatever else was economically expedient was used as ballast to stabilise merchant sailing ships. Upon arrival in port, the ballast was unloaded, carrying with it seeds native to the area where it had been collected, which can be any of the ports and their regional partners involved in trade with Europe and the Americas, including the transatlantic slave trade. Seeds contained in ballast soil may germinate and grow, potentially bearing witness and activate memories toward a far more complex narrative of world history. Official histories fail to account for, and even work to erase local knowledge and experiences. By contrast, art continues to have the potential to reclaim such narratives to contemporary social realities. Moreover, the project usually involves local residents and botanists, cooperating for the development of knowledge; such a community can encourage an approach to the research from non-traditional academic perspectives that open up possibilities and further how to think about decolonizing the very earth.

The earth is a history of site-specific accumulations of interactions between beings. At times, histories were removed and others added to forever change that earth. Plants and earth guide us in witnessing missing histories.

Sektion II: Rethinking Botanical Epistemologies

(Maria Inês Lopes Vales)

Emilia Terracciano

Invasives in the Home/at Home: The Beautiful, the Bad, and the Ugly

Plants move and rarely sit still. Indeed, the survival of most plants is predicated on migration and adaptation, that is, the colonisation of novel landscapes. And yet, it is the mobility of invasive species that has provoked in humans the most intense forms of resistance. From the Latin ‘invādere’, meaning ‘to come into, go into, usurp, attack’, the term invasive carries hostile connotations. Invasives are plants ‘out of place’, intruders, trespassers, and aliens, ‘visitors’ that are thought to have overstayed their welcome by their human hosts. But invasives have also inspired affective responses in artists who have welcomed opportunities for creative and collaborative endeavours with plants. Such artists see invasives as vital indicators of climate change, possessed of a most remarkable skill: the ability to settle in disturbed environments designed by man to facilitate capital accumulation, and obstruct them in the process. In this paper, I consider the shifting meanings surrounding ‘invasive’ plants in a range of contemporary art practices that foreground the issue of belonging/home in relation to the beautiful, the bad, and the ugly of invasive species. Ultimately, invasives compel artists and us to rethink our putative mastery over nature, and our attachment to an unchanging sense of the familiar.

Silke Felber

“Willi” and the Sensory Afterlives of Austrian Botanical Imperialism: The Case of *Amorphophallus titanum*

In May 2022, more than 7,000 visitors converged on Vienna’s Botanical Garden to witness the rare and pungent blooming of a Titan Arum (*Amorphophallus titanum*), a Southeast Asian plant infamous for its towering inflorescence and corpse-like stench. The specimen, affectionately dubbed “Willi” by the University of Vienna, was named in explicit homage to Heinrich Wilhelm Schott (1794–1865), the Austrian botanist who first taxonomized the species and played a central role in the imperial reordering of vegetal life. Livestreamed to tens of thousands more, Willi’s blooming staged what might be called a postdigital para- olfactory performance: an infrastructurally mediated orchestration of sensory desire in which smell—precisely the modality that renders the plant extraordinary—remained materially absent.

This paper uses the 2022 event to revisit the archives of Austrian botanical imperialism, examining how more-than-visual sensory registers—especially smell and the haptic dynamics of vegetal life—were rendered epistemically irrelevant in the operational logic of imperial science, despite being central to the reproductive strategies and ecological agency of the plants themselves. In the case of the Titan Arum, olfaction functions to attract carrion- mimicking pollinators, while the plant’s sticky internal textures temporarily trap these insects, ensuring fertilization through forced contact—both sensorial mechanisms crucial to its survival and interspecies communication.

The epistemic marginalization of these sensory modes becomes particularly evident in the textual corpus of the Austrian Brazil expedition (1817–1821), specifically in Heinrich Wilhelm Schott’s

Tagebücher des kaiserlich-königlichen Gärtners and Karl von Schreibers' *Nachrichten von den kaiserlich österreichischen Naturforschern in Brasilien*. Interestingly, in these documents, smell was not simply ignored but instead framed as indicators of decay, contamination, or logistical failure, reinforcing a classificatory and extractive knowledge regime. Drawing on Hsuan Hsu's notion of osmophobic worldview, and informed by Sylvia Wynter's critique of the colonial construction of Man, the paper shows how the multisensoriality of plant life was epistemically disqualified in imperially motivated botanical writings and travel accounts. This suppression of the more-than-visual is further illustrated by Schott's commissioning—at his own expense—of more than 3,400 highly detailed botanical illustrations of Araceae, now housed at the Natural History Museum in Vienna. Together with the textual indicators, I argue, these images gesture towards a specific subordination of vegetal multisensoriality in favor of gendered and racialized ocularcentric modes of order and control.

Sektion III: Ecologies of Fascism

(Lisa Marie Henschöber)

Nanna Heidenreich

Nature in and out of place? Border fascism and plant imaginations

Almost 25 years ago, Jean and John Comaroff in “Naturing the Nation” looked at the postcolonial state—here South Africa—through the lens of ecological crisis. In this paper they asked when plant ‘invaders’ are likely to become an urgent political issue. Since then, non human invasions—plants, animals and others—have made increasing headlines. These media discourses have been analyzed for their racist vocabulary and problematic reproductions of a “nature out of place” (Banu Subramaniam 2014; see also Termeer 2020, Eser 1999, de Waal 2022, to name but a few). Only two years after the Comaroffs’ article conservation biologist David Theodoropoulos called invasion biology (sometimes also named invasion science) a pseudoscience (2003, see also Rebele 2017). And yet, the military term, introduced by Charles Elton into discussions of ecologies in 1958, has since gained even more traction, and has, despite profound criticism, often replaced other fields of research dealing with species migrations, such as phytogeography, botanical geography, phyto diversity and ruderal vegetation research, to name but a few (and with specific focus on plant migrations). In my contribution I would like to pick up the Comaroffs’ question about the connexion of politics, the nation state and plant migrations and discuss them in the current context of an increasing global fascisation. Fascism, argues Harsha Walia in her book *Border and Rule* (2021), is constituted through the border and the violence of seemingly fringe far right groups actually requires the violence of the border, which is not only a project of the far or extreme right, but today is normalized and enacted by governments of all political provenance. To account for this development, cultural critic and social theorist Alberto Toscano uses the term border fascism in his most recent book (2023). I would like to look into the politics of plant migrations through two lenses: scholarly and theoretical engagements with the current political climate (using the term climate here is no coincidence) and fictional accounts. Not least because the analysis of the forms and formations of fascism requires an engagement with questions of aesthetics especially in conjunction with ideas of ‘nature’ and its place (Sontag 1974, Holert 2024).

Sonya Schönberger

Forest and War

This project investigates the interwoven legacies of war, memory, and ecological transformation within the forests of Brandenburg, surrounding Berlin. Long utilized as spaces of militarization, concealment, and destruction—through successive wars, totalitarian regimes, and ideological shifts—these landscapes also endure and regenerate beyond human temporalities. Through an artistic research approach, the project seeks to understand how these forested sites embody both heritage loss and ecological resilience.

Positioning forests as active agents rather than passive witnesses, the project employs a mixed-methods methodology encompassing site visits (for example Halbe and Belower Wald), visual

documentation, and interviews with local experts and witnesses. A central concern is how the apparent serenity of these landscapes today can obscure their violent pasts—sites of terror, forced labor, and execution often remain unmarked or visually erased. As vegetation reclaims these grounds, a false sense of closure or forgetting may emerge, especially in the context of shifting political narratives.

Brandenburg is particularly compelling due to the unique legacy of the GDR, whose approach to fascist memory diverged from that of West Germany. Many significant sites were only acknowledged or uncovered in recent decades, contributing to a fragmented and politically charged memory landscape. The project critically questions the celebratory narrative of “Deutsche Erinnerungskultur” (German memory culture), especially in light of contemporary right-wing movements that threaten to erode collective remembrance.

Through an essayistic, filmic form, this work reactivates overlooked narratives embedded in forested terrain, highlighting the tension between ecological regeneration and historical erasure. It also examines how militarized ecologies continue to shape collective memory, perception, and spatial practices. Some clips of the work-in-progress will be presented, alongside reflections on the process of uncovering, witnessing, and narrating these contested and living heritage sites.

Sektion IV: Queer Botanical Ecologies

(Lorenzo Zerbini)

Banu Subramaniam

Migrant Ecologies: Plant Worlds and the Queer Afterlives of Empire

How have histories of colonialism and their foundational language of gender, race, sexuality, and nation shaped the language, terminology, and theories of the modern plant sciences? How and why do botanical theories remain grounded in the violence of their colonial pasts? In wrestling with these difficult origins, I develop the concept of migrant ecologies to retheorize plant migration and reproductive biology. I explore new biological frameworks that harness the power of feminist thought in order to reimagine and reinvigorate our love of plants.

Joela Jacobs

“Moves to Naturalization”: The Aesthetics and Politics of Queer Plants

Flowers are a feast for the senses. Their colors, scents, and textures have evolved to appeal to pollinators and the resulting fruits taste so good that Michael Pollan argues in *Botany of Desire* that plants have cultivated us. Yet, as Freud reminds us, flowers are the genitals of plants. When plant reproduction became more widely understood in the 18th century, this realization was so scandalous that women had to be protected from these promiscuous perverts. Subsequently, plant reproduction catalyzed literary satire, e.g., about same-sex encounters between men around 1900. Showing that such “queerness” could be found in nature (a notion also extended to animals and, more recently, fungi) made the aesthetics of plants political. My talk charts such “moves to naturalization” (a term I use in reference to Tuck & Yang’s work on decolonization) that parallel people and plants to push back against historical “crime against nature” laws. Drawing on queer ecology scholarship, I map the agential history of vegetal aesthetics in relation to sexuality to examine its political power as well as some of the issues with “moves to naturalization” (e.g., the equation of queerness and reproduction).