

Phytophilic: Why Look at Plants?

An Afternoon of Plant-Attuned Video Shorts



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curated by Ellie Irons
Originally organized for 1067 PacificPeople's *Art After the Anthropocene* series in Summer 2015, now on tour

More than thirty years ago John Berger's influential essay "Why Look at Animals?" proposed an interrogation of the role of non-human animals as visual fodder in our day-to-day lives. Tracing the gradual separation between humans and other animals over history, Berger described industrialized, postwar humanity as a species alienated from its animal brethren, but compelled to watch, gaze and stare in an ongoing attempt to reconnect.

Now, as we grapple with the concept of the Anthropocene, it seems a worthwhile endeavor to expand this scrutiny of looking beyond the animal kingdom to the world of plants. The imagery included here, from archival instructional footage to contemporary video art, creates a cacophony of "green" seen in every shade and from every angle. Images of and about plant life push against one another, advocating, anthropomorphizing, romanticizing, illuminating, and obscuring in turn. Together they provide a wide-ranging perspective on an incredibly diverse kingdom of life that continues to thwart and surprise us even as we attempt to decode, control, and commodify it.

February 20th, 2016
Blue Oyster Art Project Space

In the book *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry speaks of her disgust for palm trees until the experience of being on eye level with the palms right outside her hotel window. The palms moved light and shadows across her walls in a way that completely transformed her opinion of these trees. It became a visual phenomenon that reconciled a judgment.
—Angela Dittmar

Excerpt from Part One “On Beauty and Being Wrong” found in the text *On Beauty and Being Just* by Elaine Scarry:

It seems a strange feature of intellectual life that if you question people --- “What is an instance of an intellectual error you have made in your life”--- no answer seems to readily come to mind. Somewhat better luck is achieved if you ask people (friends, students) to describe an error they have made about beauty... the question is more directly aimed at errors, and revisions, that have arisen in day-to-day life. In my own case, for example, I had ruled out palm trees as objects of beauty and then one day discovered I had made a mistake.

.....

Those who remember making an error about beauty usually recall the exact second when they first realized they had made an error. The revisionary moment comes as a perceptual slap or slam that itself has emphatic sensory properties. Emily Dickinson’s poem---

It dropped so low---in my Regard---
I heard it hit the Ground---

is an instance. A correction in perception takes place as an abrasive crash. Though it has the sound of breaking plates, what is shattering loudly is the perception itself:

It dropped so low---in my Regard---
I heard it hit the Ground---
And go to pieces on the Stones
At bottom of my mind---

.....

My palm tree is an example. Suddenly I am on a balcony and its huge swaying leaves are before me at eye level, arcing, arching, waving, cresting and breaking in the soft air, throwing the yellow sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side, running its fingers down its own piano keys, then running them back up again, shuffling and dealing glittering decks of aqua, green, yellow, and white. It is everything I have always loved, fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, open ---- lustrously in love with air and light.

Program

Angela Dittmar Posey

For you, Elaine Scarry (part 1), 2013

single channel video, 1:05

Video taken by Kathy Dittmar upon my request: “Please film a palm tree.”

- Excerpt from: *Photosynthesis: Gift of Green*, 1946 New York Botanical Garden

Kara Schmidt

Inner Landscape, 2015

Digital video, 2:35

The viral nature of photography has augmented our collective cultural perception of nature. Aggregated search engine images for “contemporary landscape” are folded into new layers and surfaces to create a new space of virtual memories. The images begin to break down and come apart through digital decay, the “outer” becoming the “inner”, highlighting the porous boundaries between technology, memory, and nature.

- Excerpt from: *The Secret Life of Plants*, 1979

Patricia Domínguez

Domestic Plant Ceremony, 2013

HD video, color, audio, 15:18

A contemporary ceremony created in order to trace the genealogy and historical processes between domestic plants and humans in the present. Why can we eat lettuce but not a domestic plant? With an open attitude, I approached the idea of the decorative aspect of three plants from personal experience. Through water, wind and fire, I honor several domestic plants in order to make them part of my body. One of them was poisonous. It paralyzed my throat for one hour, thus establishing a relationship of knowledge about that plant from the senses.

- Excerpt from *The Private Life of Plants with David Attenborough* (The Social Struggle), 1995

Mary Ivy Martin

Face Faucet, 2013, single channel video, 2:27

In my work, I attempt to relate to the natural world by challenging the accepted boundaries of indoors/outside, object/place, and nature-culture relationships. In the video “Face Faucet”, I water a rosemary plant with the sweat from my face after exercising - this is a way of trying to nurture the plant using an embarrassing physical attribute.

- Excerpt from: *The Secret Life of Plants*, 1979

Rob Carter

The Measure of a Vine, 2015

Two channel ultra HD video, color/sound

Total running time: 5:15 , Composite excerpt shown here: 2:30

In *The Measure of a Vine*, the vigorous growth and graceful movement of the noxious weed kudzu is visualized in a two-channel video, photographs and drawings. They combine scientific methodology devised by Charles Darwin and digital time-lapse technology to present two contrasting ways of perceiving and experiencing this controversial plant over a five-day period. The exhibit also presents a new series of schematic drawings made with ink derived from the kudzu plant. Despite huge strides in the biological sciences, mimicking a 19th century experiment set up a symbiotic relationship between plant and artist, revealing our troublesome inability to comprehend ‘plant-time’ or the ‘plant-intelligence’ that we rely on for survival.

- Excerpt from: *The Secrets of Nature: Seed Time*, 1926, British Instructional Films Ltd. (with Kraftwerk’s “Morgenspazierga”)

Tega Brain

Keeping Time, 2015

video, color, sound, 3:25

Keeping Time portrays a complex biological system living through the Anthropocene. The project searches social media databases for images tagged with the names of particular plant species. Images are then ordered according to their time stamps, revealing seasonal patterns and temporal relationships. We also see that most plants only become visible to us at particular moments in their life cycles - typically at times of flowering. This video interpretation of the work explores the phenology of southern hemispheres species photographed in Australia.

Angela Dittmar Posey

For you, Elaine Scarry (part 2), 2013

single channel video, 0:50

Kristyna and Marek Milde

Natural Cleaners, 2015

single channel video, 6:50

Natural Cleaners is a video documenting performances made in various natural and forest environments. In the project we engage in the activity of cleaning nature as if it would be a home. This type of work, normally reserved for the realm of domesticity, is here misplaced in to nature, involving cleaning trees, stones, grass and riverbank, while using domestic tools such as brooms brushes mops etc. We are interested in how taking the act of cleaning from its context is reduced to a very basic gesture with an edge of absurdity; but at the same time it represents the elemental mechanism of claiming and controlling space. *Natural Cleaners* looks at cleaning as a form of primeval cultural statement that draws on the premise of declaration of a space by selecting and eliminating. While culture is built on principles of elimination the cleaning in nature becomes clearly an act of intervention in the environment, a force disturbing natural progress of things. Ultimately cleaning or removing of traces equals removal of connection to wider context and continuity; a step representing separation, disconnection and state of artificiality.

- Excerpt from: *The Secret Life of Plants*, 1979

Angela Dittmar Posey

For you, Elaine Scarry (part 3), 2013

single channel video, 0:59

Patricia Domínguez

Eres un Princeso

FLORA ars + natura Residency. Bogotá, Colombia, 2013 - 2014.

Video installation in four channels, HD, color, 3:28 min.

“Eres un Princeso” investigates the current relationship between people, horses and plants in the town of Honda, product of the second colonization of Colombian land made by the narco world and its territorial conquest, after the Spanish conquest. When the Spanish introduced horses to America through the Caribbean, the indigenous viewed them as one being, without differentiating their individualities. A being who was re-

garded as a deity by the colonialist narrative. Currently, the relationship of horses and humans has become a different hybrid: a horse, a caregiver and a piece of land with decorative palms.

- Excerpt from *The Private Life of Plants with David Attenborough* (The Social Struggle), 1995 (wheat, humans)

Ellie Irons

Two Meadows, 2015

HD video, 4:15

Two meadows worlds apart appear on screen together: the urban meadow and the high mountain meadow. For the viewer immersed at eye level, both have the quintessential look of “meadow”, hosting a wide variety of wide flowers and grasses. Stepping back, their differences become apparent: barbed wire, concrete retaining walls, neighboring buildings, versus open sky and mountain vistas. Despite these divergent contexts, both spaces are heavily impacted by human activity. This particular urban meadow exists as a consequence of infrastructure. Owned by the city, it hosts a water main access point and is kept open and regularly trimmed for access. The high mountain meadow is owned by the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, and is the site of the longest running “warming experiment” in the United States, in which the landscape is heated artificially to simulate possible conditions under global warming.

Mary Ivy Martin

A Houseplant Goes on Vacation – video tribute, 2014

02:36

I took a houseplant named Dot from my home in Brooklyn on a vacation with me to Toronto; Dot travelled in one of my hand-made plant carriers. I primarily used my smartphone to document the trip and share it on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Upon our return to the United States, Dot was confiscated and destroyed by customs agents at Newark Airport; in Dot’s memory and honor, I created a tribute video with photographs from our trip. With a plant as my traveling companion, I investigated ways of relating to nature by treating the plant like a person, and I question both my connection to the natural world and my interpersonal relationships.

- Excerpt from: *Photosynthesis: Gift of Green*, 1946 New York Botanical Garden

The ever-changing display of plant forms, which I have followed for so many years, awakens increasingly within me the notion: The plant forms which surround us were not all created at some given point in time and then locked into the given form, they have been given... a felicitous mobility and plasticity that allows them to grow and adapt themselves to many different conditions in many different places. ...How they can be brought together under one concept has slowly become clear to me and that this conception can be enlivened at a higher level [of consciousness]: thus I began to recognize, in the sense perceptible form, a supersensible archetype. Whoever has felt what a rich, saturated thought... has to say, will admit what a passionate movement comes to life in the spirit when we are enthused, and we anticipate the totality of what will evolve step by step...

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Story of My Botanical Studies*, 1831
(quoted in *The Emergence of the Idea of Evolution in the Time of Goethe*)

Our attitude towards plants is a singularly narrow one. If we see any immediate utility in a plant we foster it. If for any reason we find its presence undesirable or merely a matter of indifference, we may condemn it to destruction forthwith.

— Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962

Ever since we arrived on this planet as a species, we've cut them down, dug them up, burnt them and poisoned them. Today we're doing so on a greater scale than ever [...] We destroy plants at our peril. Neither we nor any other animal can survive without them. The time has now come for us to cherish our green inheritance, not to pillage it – for without it, we will surely perish.

— David Attenborough, *The Private Life of Plants*, 1995

About Blue Oyster

Founded in 1999, the Blue Oyster Arts Trust is the governing body of the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, a not for profit art space located at 16 Dowling Street, Dunedin. All exhibitions and events are free to attend, the space offering an environment of criticality, support and learning.

Blue Oyster is supported by Creative New Zealand and the Dunedin City Council, along with a range of other sponsors, funders, patrons and supporters in and around the Dunedin community.

www.blueoyster.org.nz

Ellie Irons originally organized this event as an expansion of her “Monument of Weediness” project at 1067 PacificPeople. The event was part 1067 PacificPeople’s “Art after the Anthropocene” series, which included several events in late summer and early fall 2015. 1067 PacificPeople is a body – based interdisciplinary art work. We comprise a classless class engaged in danceless dance and artless art. We find the political in the unpolitical, the unpolitical in the political. We find the love-less in love and love in the love-less. We practice dialectical immaterialism. We act in urgency. We are a tantric connection.

www.1067pacificpeople.nyc

