

## Herba morbus

We're drawn to ideas like little moths to the light. Tentative reachings towards the light, trying to explore and understand the possibilities of everything this vast, diverse and beautiful planet has to offer us.

With *Herba morbus*, artist and scientist Catherine Polcz takes us on a journey through the strange maze of plant intelligence, inquiring down dusty corners and brightly lit hallways with an exhibition that combines and collects many fractals of science and pseudoscience, myth, art, and poetry. Presented in the format of a traditional museum exhibit, each piece is given equal weight for consideration.

Polcz's collection of plant related objects, poems, records, experiments, systems of classifications, research papers and an interactive 'visit' show a tender and curious resolve towards plants. The common threads throughout these diverse and sometimes clashing realms reveal the unifying need in humans to classify, understand, and assign language and absolute ideas onto plants. The 2008 film *The Happening* (received a solid 18% on rotten tomatoes) explores our fear of plants, the fear of the many unknowns in plants. It depicts plants as sentient, with human like motivations of revenge and murder. Cleve Backster's infamous plant consciousness studies had plants witness and identify plant "murderers." Even Mort Garson's Plantasia (a record of electronic music recorded in 1976 to play to your plants), is essentially a cute misunderstanding that again tries to assign human meaning to and anthropomorphize plants.

Plants are ancient, and the reason humans and animals can inhabit the earth. Fungi is estimated to have appeared 1.3 billion years ago and land plants 700 million years ago. Plants originally evolved in the oceans before drifting to land. Before the arrival of plants, Earth was a rocky, barren land mostly covered in ice. We depend on plants for air, food, shelter, medicine, habitat and more. Yet after Aristotle claimed plants insentient 2300 years ago, it seems not much has changed. The idea of plants having intelligence is still largely scoffed at. Part of the problem seems to be our definition of "intelligence" as belonging to humans and our systems of classification. The other side of it seems to be time. Plants can be as sophisticated in their behaviour as animals (according to the researchers at International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology), yet we can't observe this as plants operate on a much, much slower time frame. We might never be able to see and understand plants for what they are because we are simply out of step and time with them.

There is a particularly sweet (if not a little naive) tone to the 1960's and 70's era of contemplation of plants, and the accompanying contributions to pop culture that came out of this time period. The infamous book 'The Secret Life of Plants,' where Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird explored ideas of plant consciousness and emotions was, to be sure, filled with many ideas and claims that were entirely false or unsupported. It was heavily criticized by scientists and botanists. But some of these ideas are special in that we should give more consideration and credit to plants, at least for the sake of our own survival. While watching the Secret Life of Plants recently (the 1979 film based on the book with an accompanying soundtrack by Stevie Wonder) I paused it and wrote down this excerpt:

We might be more aware of the responsibility that we have to the earth....the food we eat, the air we breathe, given to us by the plants. We are the absurd appendages of an ongoing nature and nothing more. The plants alone prepared the earth for all life, for what have we prepared the plants for?

We now know that plants can communicate with each other, but there is still so much unknown. It seems in some ways we need the emotional meanderings to rouse curiosity and interest. Will this help us to understand and respect plants more? Our ideas, art, music, misunderstandings and even what we choose to research about plants ultimately seem to tell us more about ourselves, and how we as a species make

meaning than anything. Perhaps a throwback to “when science mingled with poetry in its pursuit of answers”<sup>1</sup> is in order for plants.

But the problem was far greater. The art he sought, if it exists, is a non-communicative art: and probably a non-kinetic one. It is possible that Time, the essential element, matrix, and measure of all known animal art, does not enter into vegetable art at all. The plants may use the meter of eternity. We do not know.

We do not know. All we can guess is that the putative Art of the Plant is entirely different from the Art of the Animal. What it is, we cannot say; we have not yet discovered it. Yet I predict with some certainty that it exists, and that when it is found it will prove to be, not an action, but a reaction: not a communication, but a reception. It will be exactly the opposite of the art we know and recognise. It will be the first passive art known to us.

Can we in fact know it? Can we ever understand it?

It will be immensely difficult. That is clear. But we should not despair. Remember that so late as the mid-twentieth century, most scientists, and many artists, did not believe that Dolphin would ever be comprehensible to the human brain—or worth comprehending! Let another century pass, and we may seem equally laughable. “Do you realise,” the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, “that they couldn’t even read Eggplant?” And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike’s Peak.

--excerpt from *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, Ursula K. Le Guin

-Alicia Nauta, 2016

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<sup>1</sup> "A cabinet of wonder: A Los Angeles museum filled with curio and mystery", *The Economist*, September 10, 2009.

