

METAFLORESTIK: AN UNDERGROUND ROOT SYSTEM

A riddle: Where do the four seasons collide? Where do trees constantly bud and flowers bloom all year? There are artists who work only with nature 'in nature', yet have only a passing interest in ecological issues. And then there are artists who view everything as nature, imbuing their actions with ecological concerns, even if only a small fraction of their materials come directly from nature. Gerdä Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger's installations fall distinctly in the second camp.

Sue SPAID

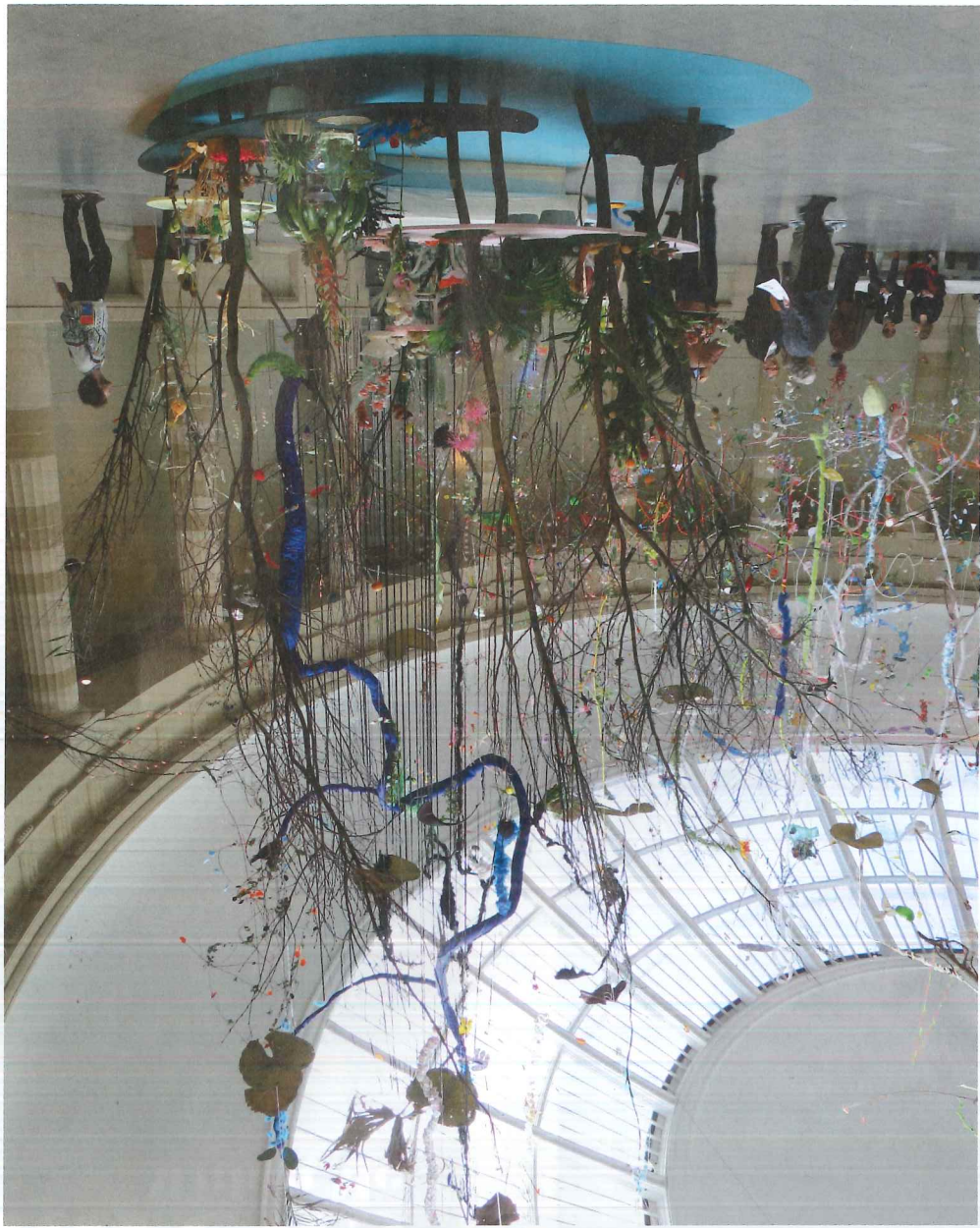
At MSK, they've built a flying underworld out of reassembled floral decorations, hydrated crystal flowers, reworked trash, fragmented egg shells, potted plants, spun cotton clouds, floating feathers, surprising plastic animals, and cleverly situated mirrors. No doubt, purists may find their over-the-top melanges distasteful (and even wasteful), or possibly too light-hearted to prompt ecological awareness. What interests me most, however, is how artistic efforts to replicate an underground root system, which they've inverted into the air, incidentally capture sprouting beans run amok, just in time for 2016 UN International Year of Pulses (legumes). The kind of things that go unseen, root systems are largely discussed in speculative, even metaphorical terms. The best known example is the rhizome, a vast self-generating root system of linking nodes, typically depicted as tubers. In Steiner and Lenzlinger's undulating model, everything is interconnected, intertwined, and networked, though nothing is so randomly linked as rhizomes. In other words, theirs is a 3D drawing comprised of lines evoking Hawaiian leis, running beans, creeping vines, climbing plants, spidly spider webs, entwined weeds, and delicate tendrils. To generate ecological awareness, Steiner and Lenzlinger's installations must trigger certain cognitive factors, most noticeably 'directed attention,' which in this case not only draws people in, but typically prompts repeat viewings, leading people to recognize more stuff. To get people to think about the ecological significance of what they are experiencing, Steiner and Lenzlinger (and their collaborators) routinely fuse unexpected materials. While a cursory glance suggests

that everything is beautiful, a closer look leads one to notice stains, spills, and things that seem quite messy, even yucky as if they are rotting. Despite this cultivated garden's overall loveliness, several spots suggest nature's true state of affairs as it undergoes competition for light, water, and nutrients.

MIRRORS

With this installation, mirrors play several intriguing functions. While gardens created for museums are typically public affairs, forcing visitors to be framed within other viewers' site lines, mirrors offer visitors a bit of privacy, as they can

virtually experience the garden with their bodies turned away from the garden, thus avoiding the gaze of others. Mirrors placed high up enable people to access views of taller objects that are otherwise out of reach. When one regards the garden from a mirror's perspective, one must choose between taking in a fraction of the scene or the entire scene from a single vantage. This gives one the sense of a single vanishing point, akin to Renaissance painting, though hardly in-stallation art. With the mirrors, one can discretely spy on others enjoying themselves or one can enter a virtual experience at a remove. No doubt, the mirrors distort but so does vision, especially when it lacks focus.



Gerdä Steiner en Jörg Lenzlinger, 'Flower Power', mixed media, 2016, photo Jean-François Paquay