

Learning from Plants

by Sue Spaid

REALISING PLANTS RIGHTS!

One of today's most pressing questions is: "Why aren't plants valued on par with animals?" Neurobotanist Stefano Mancuso cites three examples of plant oversight: 1) When shown wildlife photos, 96% of people see "just animals".¹ 2) The Biblical story of Noah's ark never mentions plants, as if they're not "living creatures".² 3) When asked to name Earth's largest creature, people usually cite the blue whale (maximum recorded weight is 170 metric tonnes), yet far larger are Giant Sequoias (many weigh over 1,000 tonnes)³ and many fungi (one 2,400 year-old US-based honey mushroom weighs 660 tons and is spread over 809 hectares).⁴ The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences notes that of the 550 gigatons (1 gt= 1B metric tonnes) of carbon present in life on Earth, plants comprise 450 gt (82%), while animals total 2 gt.⁵ Clearly, "Plants rule!" But as Mancuso reports, plants are dismissed because "it is 'impossible' for us to put ourselves in the place of a plant."⁶

Anticipating this explanation, 431art has since 2009 offered Empathy Training with Plants, a series of exercises focused on grasping plant's distinctive qualities, which helps people to identify with plants, and thus boosts their value. Since plants provide animals habitat/nutrients, store/transpire water, sequester carbon dioxide, and generate humus rich soil, it's truly odd that animal protection services such as The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (since 1824) or Deutscher Tierschutzbund (since 1881) don't also accommodate plants. Tree-planting sprees have sprouted across the planet, yet trees remain instrumentalised, since people protect those that provide shade or increase property values. By contrast, people protect squirrels and frogs, which offer few tangible benefits. But as plant philosopher Michael Marder points out, plants "give without reserve to everything and everyone that lives".⁷ To counter people's warped attitudes toward plants, 431art launched botanoadopt® (since 2009), their very own plant protection agency which has enabled citizens to either drop off or pick up more than a thousand of urban plants that would have otherwise bit the dust. In addition to plants receiving names and biographies, adoptive parents sign contracts that commit them to consider the plant a family member, and submit photos regularly to post on 431art's website. botanoadopt® thus demonstrates how to treat plants with "dignity and respect". Plants in need of spe-

cial care retreat to Botania Frankfurt, a place modeled on Christiana Copenhagen, where plants can develop their individuality.

431art actually initiated botanoadopt® in 2006, but it took a few years more to develop the concept and make it feasible. Contemporaneous with 431art's efforts, several nations legalised plant rights. In 2008, Ecuador's new constitution recognised the Rights of Nature. In addition to forbidding the treatment of nature as property, their constitution claims that "nature in all its life forms has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles. And we – the people – have the legal authority to enforce those rights on behalf of ecosystems".⁸ The same year, Switzerland issued "The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants," a report claiming that all „living organisms should be considered morally for their own sake because they are alive.“ Bolivia's Plurinational Legislative Assembly initiated the "Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well" (2012), which succeeded the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010) that originally declared Earth and its "life-systems as titleholders of inherent rights specified in the law".⁹ Art historian T.J. Demos attributes these developments to "an intensity of interrelated legal, political, and cultural developments in the Americas – from the Southern Cone to the Arctic Pole – that link Indigenous movements, political activists and ecologically-concerned artists, and legal and philosophical theories around rights-to-nature discourse".¹⁰ It's noteworthy that 431art regularly realise plants rights, and have thus initiated actions that largely remain discourse elsewhere.¹¹

ONTOPHYTOLOGY (ONTOLOGY OF VEGETATION)

Marder argues that what sustains plant dignity "under the heading of constitutional law" demands further development. And doing so requires cultivating a way of thinking about plants "with them and, consequently, with and in the environment, from which they are not really separate".¹² Being rooted, plants are often typecast as immobile. We imagine them being governed by external factors such as sunlight, nutritional sources, other living beings, and even sounds, but as Marder reminds, "plants are neither passive nor active," and unlike human beings who primarily depend on other humans, plants capably depend on "others that are not at all akin to them".¹³

1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBgT5OeAQFk>, accessed 5. August 2018.

2: https://www.ted.com/talks/stefano_mancuso_the_roots_of_plant_intelligence, accessed 5. August 2018.

3: Peter Wohlleben: "The Hidden Life of Trees", Vancouver 2016, p. 50.

4: Ibid.

5: <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/5/29/17386112/all-life-on-earth-chart-weight-plants-animalspnas>, accessed 13 August 2018.

6: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/radical-conservation/2015/aug/04/plants-intelligent-sentientbook-brilliant-green-internet>, accessed 16 August 2018.

7: Michael Marder: "Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life", New York 2013, S. 52.

8: <http://therightsofnature.org/ecuador-rights/>, accessed 15. August 2018.

9: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_the_Rights_of_Mother_Earth, accessed 5. Januar 2018.

10: T.J. Demos: "Rights of Nature: The Art and Politics of Earth Jurisprudence", <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.ucsc.edu/dist/0/196/files/2015/10/Demos-Rights-of-Nature-2015.compressed.pdf>, accessed 4. February 2019; Id. et al.: "Elemental: an arts and ecology reader", London 2016, p. 134.

11: On the "rights of nature" movement, see <http://therightsofnature.org/time-line>, accessed 15. August 2018.

12: Michael Marder, pp. 180–181.

13: Ibid., p. 70.

"Their 'other' is the entire inorganic mineral world, the world they conquer both by spatially spreading themselves on the surface of the planet and by 'digesting' mineral nutrients."¹⁴

Moreover, "plant-thinking is plant-doing, a habitus of life.... No neutrality, no objectivity – only the proliferation of vegetal life, in plants as well as outside of them, through the mutually supplementary dimensions of extended thinking and doing."¹⁵ Marder adds, "Learning from plants is in the first instance unlearning the objectifying approach to the world".¹⁶ Being so different from us, plants prompt us to substitute empathy for objectification, as 431art discovered long ago. Philosopher Luce Irigaray links "receptive subjectivity, thinking, and plants," since she views the contemplation of plants as mind-enriching.¹⁷ However, 431art's approach proves that empathy arises from physical engagement, not sheer contemplation, which erroneously leads people to describe comatose people as being in a vegetative state. That plants constantly move, however imperceptibly, is a truth arising from our having surveilled them with tools that aid the human eye. "The fugal, or fugitive mode of being; responsible for the unapparent character of vegetal life 'loves to hide';" and thus requires a thorough digging under and rooting out on our part. Inaccurate plant stereotypes reflect human beings' over-reliance on observable evidence, aka objectification.¹⁸ Plants, which supposedly have 15-20 senses, are the very kind of living beings that challenge human beings' faith in our five senses.¹⁹

Marder alternatively characterises plants as tending others and retrieving information, which he considers indicative of their nonconscious intentionality, "a thinking that is fluid, receptive, dispersed, non-oppositional, nonrepresentational, immanent, and material-practical".²⁰ He notes how "the germination of a plant striving toward the light of the sun happens simultaneously with its roots burrowing ever deeper into the darkness of the earth.... The fragile balance of light and darkness, of the open and the closed, required for the plant's biological life is equally applicable to its persistence as a living figuration of thought; if we are to 'think the plants', we must not shy away from darkness and obscurity, even as we let them appear in their own light; the one emanating from their own kind of being".²¹ For Marder, as well as 431art, "vegetal being revolves around non-identity understood both as the plant's insepara-

bility from the environment wherein it germinates and grows, and as its style of living devoid of a clearly autonomous self".²² No wonder 431art consider plants' capacity to tend neighbouring species exemplary of a selfless act.

14: Michael Marder, p. 41.
15: Ibid., p. 181.
16: Ibid., p. 71.
17: Ibid., p. 6.
18: Ibid., p. 28.
19: <https://www.lindau-nobel.org/plant-intelligence-our-5-senses-15-more>, accessed 17. August 2018.
20: Michael Marder, p. 152.
21: Ibid., pp. 29–30.

22: Ibid., p. 162.

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Gabriel Díez Lacunza: "Por la burocracia, cuesta hacer andar a una institución pública", <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2014/7/21/por-burocracia-cuesta-hacer-andar-institucion-publica-27288.html>, accessed 15. August 2018.