

ANTENNAE

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Beyond Morphology

George Gessert – *Divine Plants and Magical Animals* / Gregory Pryor – *Postcolonial Botany* / Lois Weinberger – *Green Man* / Susan Purdy – *The Lost Forest* / Caroline Durré and Susan Purdy – *Phitophobia australis* / Michela Pasquali – *Beyond Gardens* / Steven Burt – *Fanciful and Very Much Alive: Plants, Prints and Drawings* / Janet Lawrence – *Waiting: a Medical Garden for Ailing Plants* / Helen Pynor – *Silent Running* / Eduardo Kac – *Natural History of the Enigma* / Heide Hatry – *Flowers of Deceit* / Mark Fairington – *Flora* / Guto Nobrega – *Leaves System: Communicating with Plants* / Anna Tsing – *Unruly Edges: mushrooms as companion species*

ANTENNAE

The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 18

Following the success of our previous instalment entirely dedicated to plants and contemporary art, *Antennae* is back to the botanical world with an even richer and more generous offering. Artist George Gessert, author of the book *Green Light*, in which he explores the role that aesthetic preferences have played in bioart, opens this issue with the topic of divine animals and plants looking at the dynamics of domestication. In Autumn 2010 *Antennae* launched an experiment called *The Silence of the Plants*. Triggered by the publication of a newspaper article on the subject of plants and ethics published on *The New York Times*, a challenging discussion amongst some of *Antennae's* readers, contributors and board members emerged. The article titled 'Sorry vegans, Brussels sprouts like to live too' is an intentional provocative and challenging piece that pushes a number of relevant buttons from vegetarianism/veganism to sentient/non-sentient qualities in plants and animals and asks broader questions about animal and plant life alike.

From this discussion, the issue moves on to focus on the subject of conservationism, national identity and botanical heritage through the work of Gregory Pryor, the artist whose co-curatorial contribution has much influenced the development of *Antennae's* botanical investigation. An exclusive interview with international artist Loise Weinberger maintains the focus on the Australian botanical world. Weinberger states, that "the way that a society treats plants is a mirror image of itself." His concentrated spaces for that which is marginalized, unpleasant and driven out of public awareness impart to the viewer a mental space of reflection and define a physical site in which aspects of naturalness and liveliness become visible and supersede all regulatory strictures. Weinberger thus repudiates the classical concept of art, customary work-forms and traditional artistic locations. The photographs of Susan Purdy further explore these concepts addressing the fact that as an immigrant people Australians have not been reconciled to the given vegetation of their continent; they have been driven by an implacable desire to remake the land, to force it to conform to an unattainable ideal.

The clash between nature and culture is then explored by Michela Pasquali, landscape designer and editor of the book series *Oltre i Giardini (Beyond Gardens)* who takes us through a very interesting journey of urban green and the challenges involved in the designing of truly eco-friendly and community-friendly green spaces in the city. The issue then focuses on plants and representation through the work of Stephen Burt who invents "natural" forms that often cast plants as central dramatic figures, re-imagining rather than replicating the social relations of species. Unabashedly rich in detail and colour, his prints and drawings reveal the artist's lifelong fascination with "the curious and the small" as well as his years of studying and copying Old Master prints. The historical thread is expanded by Janet Laurence's *Waiting: a medicinal garden for ailing plants*, a major installation for the Sydney Biennale of 2010, loosely imagined as a medicinal garden but one where the onus of care has shifted. Instead of the simples and herbs of the European pharmacopeia, *Waiting* sheltered a range of Australian native plants, some healthy, some ailing, and others dead. The theme of otherworldly plants is presented in Helen Pynor's photographs somewhat reminiscent of the final scenes of the 1972 film *Silent Running* in which Earth's last remaining forests are secured in greenhouse-like geodesic domes outside the orbit of Saturn.

This issue of *Antennae* draws to a close on the controversial work of transgenic artist Eduardo Kac and his recent experimentation with plants that led to the creation of human-plant hybrids called *Edunia*. The blurring of boundaries between animal and plant is further problematized by the photographic work of Heide Hatry, where nothing is what it seems. Should you not wish to go as far as 'becoming plant' you may want to try talking to one through the work of Guto Nobrega's, *Leaves System*, which attempts to establish interspecies communication between humans and plants through electric conductivity. The issue comes to a close with the breathtaking new body of work by Mark Fairnigton, an artist who has dedicated his painting career to the hyperrealist interpretation of animal specimens in natural history museums and that has too embraced the subject of plants. But the last word is that of Anna Tsing and her challenging ideas on mushrooms. We well know that mushrooms are not plants, but let's face it, it does not seem likely that a full issue of *Antennae* will be dedicated to the subject soon, so it seemed plausible to at least feature it here, if only by proxy. And to make this issue of *Antennae* extra special, we also have our first ever supplement. *The Urpflanze*, takes his title from the primal/primordial plant - is Goethe's imaginary plant that contains coiled up within it, the potential to generate all possible future forms. The supplement is the brainchild of Melanie Jackson, Lecturer at the Slade School of Fine Art and Esther Leslie, Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck.

Lastly, don't forget: a weed is a plant in the wrong place, just as much as a pest is an animal in the wrong place. Or, according to Ralph Waldo Emerson, a weed is "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered".



Giovanni Aloï

Editor in Chief of Antennae Project



Giuseppe Arcimboldo
La Primavera, 1537, oil on panel

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Humans have bred plants and animals with an eye to aesthetics for centuries: flowers are selected for colorful blossoms or luxuriant foliage; racehorses are bred for the elegance of their frames. Hybridized plants were first exhibited as fine art in 1936, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed Edward Steichen's hybrid delphiniums. Since then, bio art has become a genre; artists work with a variety of living things, including plants, animals, bacteria, slime molds, and fungi.

Text by **George Gessert**

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In Autumn Antennae launched an experiment called The Silence of the Plants. Triggered by the publication of a newspaper article on the subject of plants and ethics published on The New York Times, a challenging and colourful discussion amongst some of Antennae's readers, contributors and board members emerged. The article titled 'Sorry vegans, Brussels sprouts like to live too' is an intentional provocative and challenging piece that pushes a number of relevant buttons from vegetarianism/veganism to sentient/non-sentient qualities in plants and animals and broader questions about animal and plant life.

The original article and exchange is featured here.

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Weinberger states, "The way that a society treats plants is a mirror image of itself." His concentrated spaces for that which is marginalized, unpleasant and driven out of public awareness impart to the viewer a mental space of reflection and define a physical site in which aspects of naturalness and liveliness become visible and supersede all regulatory strictures. Weinberger thus repudiates the classical concept of art, customary work-forms and traditional artistic locations.

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Phytophobia australis is a dialogue between two Australian artists, Caroline Durré and Susan Purdy. In this exchange they explore the historical confrontation between European settlers and the Australian flora. As an immigrant people Australians have not been reconciled to the given vegetation of their continent; they have been driven by an implacable desire to remake the land, to force it to conform to an unattainable ideal. Phytophobia australis, a collage of documents, mirrors the patchwork state of remnant indigenous vegetation, and investigates the inability of a people to be reconciled to their land.

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Stephen Burt's work invents "natural" forms that often cast plants as central dramatic figures, re-imagining rather than replicating the social relations of species. Unabashedly rich in detail and color, his prints and drawings reveal the artist's lifelong fascination with "the curious and the small" as well as his years of studying and copying Old Master prints. Here he discusses these aspects of his work in an exclusive interview with Susan McHugh.

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Helen Pynor's latest body of work is unerringly beautiful. Budding native plants float in the ether, seeming to gently sway amidst the clouds, tenderly cocooned in fragrant tissue, romantic bouquets of red gum and wattle, a lover's carefully arrayed gift.

Text by **Ashley Crawford**

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Eduardo Kac has over the past ten years developed a uniquely controversial career built on the challenges posed by his experimental practices largely revolving on transgenic art. Since the development of his GFP Bunny, Kac has continued challenging ethical boundaries through a focus on plants. Here he introduces his "plantimal", a new hybridic creation.

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Text by **Rob Stone**

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In the realm of techno-art, the physical space, cyberspace and imaginary space are entangled. The flux of informational networks may be thought of as structural lines of an invisible field interconnecting elementary parts. Sensors, interfaces, organic and artificial bodies are physical and virtual nodes resonating in response to the system's dynamics. New digital technologies are shedding light on the space of interconnection between living systems and, in turn, between themselves and machines. Interactive art displaces our perception from the object to this interrelational field.

Text by **Guto Nobrega**

110 Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species

Although we are very aware that mushrooms are not plants, we have decided to bring this issue of Antennae to a close with a fantastic piece by Anna Tsing on this unusual subject. If discussing plants in the arts and humanities is avant-garde, then discussing mushrooms is, by comparison, really, really extreme.

Text by **Anna Tsing**

FLOWERS OF DECEIT

Heide Hatry's challenging body of work reveals that The coexistence of beauty and ferocity can reveal there is holism in transforming the opposites

Text by **Heide Hatry**

My current project, which will be documented in the forthcoming book, *Flowers of Deceit*, began as an innocent question: why do flowers exert such a strong and immediate emotional impact on me and, I assume, many if not most others? Why do we find them so invigorating, so uplifting, calming, and consoling? In my somewhat perverse way, I immediately imagined a scenario that would undermine the normal relationship between human and flower, perceiver and perceived, at first as something of a personal thought experiment, but then as the basis for a more general exploration of aesthetic reception and the sociology/anthropology of beauty.

For some years, I have been working with biological materials, animal skin, flesh, and organs, to create art that addresses issues of personal identity, gender roles, appearance and reality, subject and object, the moral, ethical, and political dimensions of meat production and consumption, and a wide range of other topics. The idea of creating flowers out of animal offal was thus a quite natural extension of my work in that eccentric medium and what seemed to me to be a great way both to cut through the accretion of social determinants of aesthetic

reception and to specifically thematize the ways in which codified expectations play a defining role in what we think of as beautiful. I rather think of the idea of beauty (and many other philosophical concepts) as having seemingly incompatible, but quite real, dimensions, similar in a way to the wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics. On the one hand, beauty is certainly a universal, and unitary, concept; on the other, it is a social construct, and one, which changes over time and place. It is utterly useless, and yet it everywhere seems to serve ulterior purposes. The doomed effort to compel these aspects to coincide, or to make one somehow exhaust the other, is at the basis of our distrust of the concept itself, when the very tension is what I believe sustains it. I thought it important from the outset of this project, therefore, to integrate a plurality of voices into the investigation, and I invited thinkers, researchers, and artists to address my question, which I felt was secretly the question of beauty itself, from as many informed perspectives as possible.

The flowers depicted in *Flowers of Deceit* are photographic documentations of sculptures composed mainly out of animal organs, disposed in different environments to which, the context suggests, they would be native. The photographs,

and I mean here the very fact that they are photographs as much as I do their specific merits, make the flowers appear to be "real," so real that it is quite difficult to see that they are, in fact, constructions, without having been provided with additional information. They are not composed as still-lives and have nothing to do with kitchens or butcher shops; they are not polemical, but are supposed merely to look like simple snapshots of flowers. They appear convincing, in part, as a consequence of visual habit and expectation.

The flowers with which we normally surround ourselves are dead detached sex organs from living things, bred explicitly to serve our pleasure, and not even our sustenance. The animal materials of which the sculptural flowers that are at the heart of the present collaboration undeniably derive from living creatures bred solely to die for our sustenance, but they are the "worthless" waste products of that process, that is, they serve no, or only an incidental, role in alimentation – lungs, hearts, stomachs, livers, tongues, bladders and, yes, sex organs as well. Yet their presence excites abhorrence while that of the former, joy.

In the course of working with these eccentric biological materials in my art in recent years I have become interested in the dynamic between perception and knowledge and aesthetic response. I've often observed objects or images that appear immediately appealing become repulsive to their viewer as knowledge of the materials of which they are constructed becomes clear. *Flowers of Deceit* is, therefore, both a more general exploration of the at once social and visceral dimensions of aesthetic response, and a quite personal voyage into the sources and meaning of my own fascination with natural forms and materials.

By "deconstructing," and reconstructing the flower – removing all of its potentially attractive elements (color, texture, vitality, smell...) other than the most basic forms (and even these often become mere allusions to naturally occurring forms) – I have tried to establish a non-prejudicial basis for investigation for my collaborators. Even the names of the flowers have been "scientized" (they are called by simple Latin names reflecting the materials of which they have been formed, for example, *aures porcinae* (pig ears)) so as to minimize even the effects of linguistic association. Of course, the question of historical, social or gender-specific substrates remains largely untouched by this method; it even prevails upon them for elements of the "deceit," and the extent to which they play roles in our response to "natural beauty" serve to animate and articulate the

discussion. The contrast or tension or aporia created by looking upon something beautiful which is, in fact, for most viewers something repulsive, invokes numerous questions, which I hope will create a subtextual antiphon to the essays and which will occasionally erupt directly within them.

The biological purpose of even the demurest flower is seduction; its social function among humans is often that as well. And my flowers are also intended to seduce, but only to seduce the unthinking into thought and the thinking into imagining.

Among the more than eighty contributors to the project, who will approach my questions from a plurality of scientific and humane perspectives, are colleagues in the fields of anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, philology, mathematics, botany, neuroscience, art history, gender studies, physics, chemistry, sensory studies, etc., as well as poets and writers, all using flowers broadly, and my own "Flowers of Evil" more specifically, as a locus for their thought. Contributors include Justin E.H. Smith, Avital Ronell, Lucy Lippard, Mary Caponegro, Claudia Benthien, Robert Kelly,...

The book will be published in January 2012 by Charta Art Books

Heide Hatry is a New York-based German neo-conceptual artist, curator and editor. Her work, often either body-related or employing animal flesh and organs (cf: bio-art), has aroused controversy and has been considered horrific, repulsive or sensationalist by some critics, while others have hailed her as an "imaginative provocateur", "a force of nature...", an artist and a humanist who is making a selfless contribution to life," and an artist whose works provoke a "reaction akin to having witnessed a murder." Her work bears conceptual (and material) similarities to that of Joseph Beuys, Damien Hirst, Dieter Roth, Jana Sterbak, and Louise Bourgeois. Hatry grew up on a farm in the outskirts of Holzgerlingen. She left home at the age of 15 to enroll in a sports school. Later she studied painting, printing, photography, and sculpture at various art schools including Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart and Pädagogische Hochschule in Heidelberg, as well as art history at the University of Heidelberg. After many years teaching painting while working in the antiquarian book trade, she moved to New York in 2003 and began her career as a visual artist.



Heide Hatry

Aures porcinae, 2008, photograph © Heide Hatry



Heide Hatry

Venter taurinus cauda barbi gallinae and *Branchialis pescis*, 2010, photograph © Heide Hatry



Heide Hatry

Caudae ocelli pisces, 2011, photograph © Heide Hatry



Heide Hatry

Barbus rufus filamentosus piscis, 2010, photograph © Heide Hatry