

Laura Skehan

*A vegetal consciousness*

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Laura Skehan's art practice traces the complex relationships between humans, our bodies, knowledge and systems of classification of the natural world via moving image and sculpture. Skehan's recent work synthesises sculpture and video into installation environments to examine the material, biological and political position of plants and minerals in relation to human life.

In the publication *The Chernobyl Herbarium* Philosopher Michael Marder asks 'when our consciousness has been exploded, can plants assist us in reconstituting it?'<sup>1</sup> Marder couples his writing 'fragments' in this publication with photograms of plant life from the Chernobyl exclusion zone by the artist Anaïs Tondeur. In *The Chernobyl Herbarium* Marder reflects on the hegemonic relationships between humans and plants and challenges the perception that humans have mastery over the natural world. Marder acknowledges the utterly transformative nature of the Chernobyl disaster, that evidenced the global anthropogenic impact of humans on the environment in which we live, describing this as a 'mutilation'<sup>2</sup> of the earth. Marder on one hand indicates the devastating and far ranging effects of human behaviour on the biosphere, and on the other notes the utterly hapless human condition in relation to nature linked to a failure to adapt and integrate with the natural world. Marder considers the possibility for a recalibration of human consciousness in this context. His proposal is that we consider our existence through a closer relation to other forms of sentient life.

Skehan's practice also suggests the potential for the reconstitution or rehabilitation of our consciousness through plants by inviting the viewer in the first instance to consider the human impulse to tame, cultivate and collect vegetation and other non-human life. Skehan

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<sup>1</sup> Anaïs Tondeur Michael Marder, *The Chernobyl Herbarium* (Open Humanities Press, 2016). 48

<sup>2</sup> Michael Marder, *The Chernobyl Herbarium*. 48

points the viewer to the particular colonial and imperial history of botany by engaging the motif of the glasshouse in her video practice.

In Skehan's recent video work *A seeing* the viewer is presented with extended views of darkly shot interiors of the Cambridge Glasshouse Butterfly house in Malahide Castle. The point of view of the camera appears to emulate that of a plant, gazing steadily out the panes of the structure, or scanning across the interior. Outside the greenhouse plants can be seen as active and skittering in the elements. Inside the Greenhouse the vegetal life is dormant and suspended, respirating quietly in the artificial climate. Strangely, in this film, like the plants, the butterflies that inhabit the glasshouse appear only as static beings.

In one sequence from '*A seeing*', a clutch of decaying bananas become visible, the Fyffes banana importer label still attached. These fruits have travelled thousands of miles in a global supply chain to find themselves returning to soil here, rotting, seething and devoured by insects. Shortly after this sequence the camera apprehends a frieze of leaves, stems and blossoms shot against glass panes. These plants appear almost in x-ray. Outlined and illuminated from behind they are flattened and rendered into images against the backdrop of the plant life outside, whose fronds gesticulate wildly in the wind. The confines of the glasshouse render the plants within it still and captive.

The rehabilitative potential of a refigured human relationship to vegetal and botanical life is explored further by Michael Marder in his collaborative publication with Luce Irigaray titled *Through Vegetal Being, Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Marder notes that like plants,

Humans should also strive to relate to the world non-possessively; our becoming hinges on the cultivation of this approach in ourselves... On a faster track toward a new becoming, plants can show the way: from them, we can begin to learn how to become (a) human within the context of our life that is our logos—the life/logos that is embodied, finite, necessarily shared...<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being Two Philosophical Perspectives* (Columbia University Press, 2016). p. 207

Marder explores the human relationship to plant life in the western metaphysical tradition, noting the human impulse to instrumentalise, possess and co-opt the plant rather than to learn with, live through and in touch with botanical life.

Marder points to the necessity of an embodied approach to human logos to uncouple the impulse to possession of the natural world. He notes that our becoming depends on an adaptation where we appropriate other *logoi* in a non-possessive way, he invokes Plotinus' notion of plant behaviour and 'growth-thought' and suggests our bodies are embedded within the complex relations of plants and other non-human life. Marder notes our entanglement and symbiosis with the life around us and invites a resistance to 'the urge to judge plants and animals by human standards and respecting the silent flourishing of plants and nature as the manifestations of their becoming, without which we, too, cannot live.'<sup>4</sup>

The potential of 'growth-thought'; embodying the logos of botanical life to enable a rehabilitative relationship to ourselves and the material world is gestured to by Skehan in the moments in her practice where she references the human body in movement. An embodied knowledge and encounter with the world is explored in her practice when the human body is placed in the landscape and in choreographed relation to sculptural materials and geological formations.

In the work *Four Causes* Skehan considers the choreography of the body and its engagement with matter and landscape in this installation work that comprises sculpture and video. In this work the human body is depicted shaping itself and shaping materials such as plaster, alongside footage of stalactites and stalagmites, the sequence serving to highlight the autopoiesis of these mineral structures. The video and sculptural work *Political Land/Poetic Territory* more explicitly describes the politics of our relationship to the natural world. In this case Skehan depicts the movement of soldiers in practice drills, the artists'

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<sup>4</sup> Irigaray and Marder, *Through Vegetal Being Two Philosophical Perspectives*. p. 206

hand forming clay and the basalt geological formations found in Northern Ireland. *Political Land/Poetic Territory* suggests the geopolitical arrangement and possession of the natural world via nationhood and borders, and how these borders are attended to symbolically and practically through choreographed human bodies.

Laura Skehan's work poetically documents the hierarchical structures that humans have set up in relation to the natural world, and touches upon how these hierarchies are replicated across political and social systems. Skehan traces how sentient beings - plant, animal and human - are placed in service of empires and empiricism. A way forward is suggested in Skehan's work, an alternative proposed through 'growth-thought' - a sensate, sensitive and deeply embodied encounter with the world where our bodies are permitted another form of knowing in concert with the beings around us.

### **Bibliography**

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*Two Philosophical Perspectives*. Columbia University Press, 2016. doi:10.7312/irig17386.

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