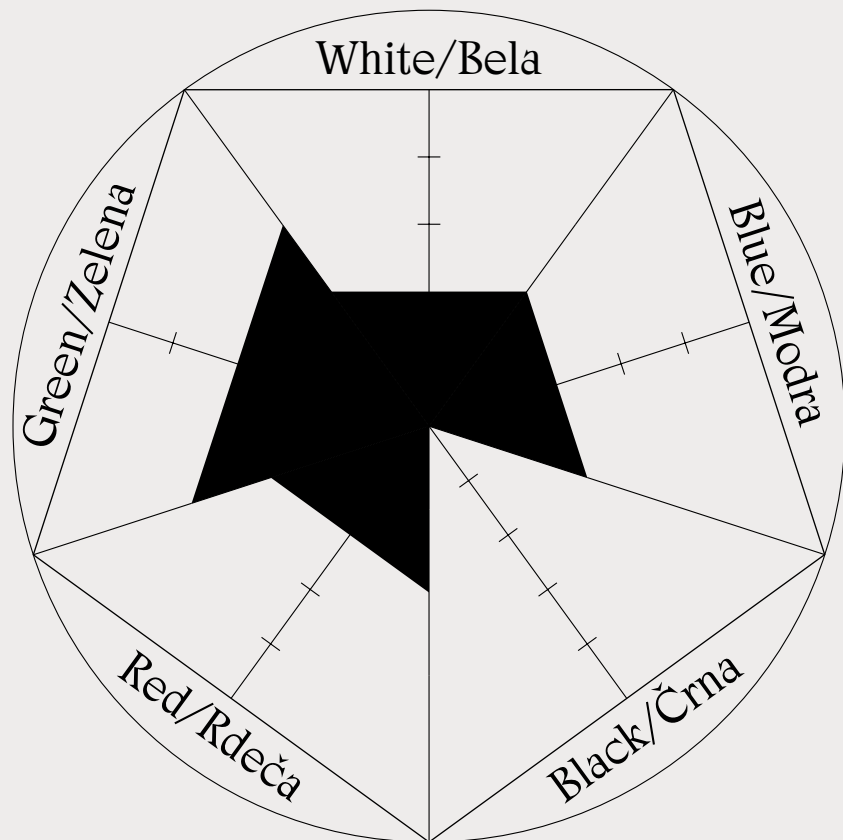


CASE STUDY

2

ŠTUDIJA
PRIMERA



WHITE

participation, care

BLUE

awareness-raising, learning

BLACK

RED

change in relationships, empathy

GREEN

plant rights, post-humanism, ecology

BELA

participacija, skrb

MODRA

ozavešćanje, učenje

ČRNA

RDEČA

spreminjanje odnosov, empatija

ZELENA

pravice rastlin, posthumanizam, ekologija

ABANDONED PLANTS SANCTUARY

AUTHORS

THEORETICAL MENTOR

PRACTICAL MENTOR

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YEAR

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Although the domestication of ornamental plants dates back over 2000 years, it was only with the advent of industrialization and capitalism that we entered the so-called “great era of ornamental plant domestication”. Ornamental plants have become a commodity, which in Western society has led to a consumerist (use-it-and-throw-it-away) attitude towards plants. However, scientific discoveries of the last two decades have become increasingly incorporated in contemporary ecological and social discourses, revealing a tendency to consider plants as autonomous living beings with certain rights, which requires a substantial change in the mindset of the general public. This raises the question: can contemporary participatory art practices act as catalysts, fostering change in the relationship between humans and plants?

STARTING POINT

Relationship human–plant

Hanžek and Hrup point out that the “great ornamental plants domestication era” did not occur somewhere in the distant past but is happening today. Capitalism generates the surpluses that sustain ornamental gardening, and the continuous introduction of novelties has become a trend that

only a minority of participants in the consumer cycle seem to be aware of and reflect upon its consequences. As a result, in an extremely short period, a multitude of variations and fashionable plants intended exclusively for mass commercial sale has been cultivated, a phenomenon that Hanžek and Hrup define a *biological Disneyland*.

Instrumentalising and exploitative attitude towards everything animate and inanimate in our environment is underpinned in the West by a long history of anthropocentric perceptions of the world (Ramos 2016, 116). These views have been strongly influenced by Aristotle's concept of the hierarchy of souls, according to which plants, incapable of perception and conscious movement, occupy the lowest position (Bakke 2012, 17). This hierarchical concept also holds a political dimension:

↪ [A]fter the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and [...] the other animals exist for the sake of man, [...] for food, and for the provision of clothing and various instruments. Now if nature makes nothing incomplete, and nothing in vain, the inference must be that she has made all animals for the sake of man." (Aristotle 1943, 65–66)

It is in this division between humans and other animals (and other living beings) that Hanžek and Hrup identify the key argumentation in favour of our presumed spiritual superiority, which is justifying our behaviour towards nature; this attitude is further explained by the dualistic perception of nature and culture as being in eternal binary opposition. Culture, as an array comprising products of humanity, encompasses everything connected with human work and creativity, be it art or language, and stands in contrast to nature, considered as everything that constitutes the non-human world: plants, animals, rocks and forces of nature.

According to Hanžek and Hrup, the belief that humanity is not only separate from nature, but also that aesthetics is associated exclusively with rational thinking—a capability unique to humans—is supported by a distinctly anthropocentric worldview, which, in the light of social reality, ecological crisis, crisis of values and general digitalisation of society, requires a thorough reconsideration. Lawyer Polly Higgins, author of the proposal for a *Universal Declaration of Planetary Rights* to the United Nations, draws parallels between the current global ecological crisis and the post-World War II humanitarian crisis that prompted the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. As Higgins argues for a transformative shift in personal awareness and general attitude towards

the planet, comparable to the revolution brought about by Copernicus, she simultaneously advocates for a transition from human-centred mechanistic system to a more holistic one and envisions a change in the relationship between humans and plants (Ackroyd and Heather, 2011, 63–71).

CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE ISSUE

Plants rights

Discussions in relation to the rights and dignity of plants are also spurred by findings in the fields of neurobiology. According to Bakke, research on plant intelligence, root brains, plant memory and other related topics suggests the existence of previously unrecognised capabilities of plants and dimensions of their functioning. These could be described with terms that some recognise and others vehemently reject; i.e. awareness, sensitivity, active responding to the environment and interacting, ability to communicate and even intelligence, which post-anthropocentric and post-humanistic theories include in their reflections. Nevertheless, human-plant ethics is still a controversial topic, because, as Matthew Hall writes, “contemporary Western action toward plants does not acknowledge their sentient, intelligent, autonomous status” (Bakke 2012, 9).

What emerges in the light of the ecologic crisis and scientific findings is the clear need for establishing a new type of relationship that acknowledges the different nature and otherness of plants (and animals) as well as accepts the ontological fact that they do not exist for human enjoyment and consumption (Marder 2013, 34). Hanžek and Hrup contend that in this context the question of plant rights emerges as one of the most important challenges faced by researchers from the fields of philosophy, ethics and the natural sciences and, potentially, also by the legislative branch of government. Another question on which different authors express different views is whether there will be a general shift in mindset that will provide a sufficiently solid basis for a resulting change in attitude towards plants and the environment, as well as whether there will be a need for legal and legislative changes.

Marder advocates for the necessity of political and economic reorganisation of the system, leading to the “liberation” of plants, whose well-being will not be in contrast with human interests; this change entails shifting the thinking away from efficient systems of food and goods production towards a system based on solidarity and cohabitation with other living beings (Marder 2013, 30–31). An example of legislative change

is the constitution of Ecuador, which was approved by a large majority of voters in 2008. It legally recognised the rights of nature, granting it “the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles”. In addition, it specifies that all persons have the legal obligation to guarantee the exercise of these rights on behalf of ecosystems.

Conversely, in the article *Plant Autonomy and Human Plant Ethics*, Matthew Hall proposes that the key to addressing the problem lies in shifting attitudes towards plants on a daily, individual level rather than in introducing legislative changes. In this context, he refers to the reflections on morality by the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, who states that ethics does not stem from adhering to certain rules and laws; rather, an individual’s internal moral impulse determines their attitude towards others and other. Moral rules and standards have the opposite effect: they limit the moral impulse and reduce ethical responsibility, ultimately making us less moral instead of more moral (Bauman 2007). Hall suggests it is premature to promote legislation changes in this field; instead, we first need to focus on our everyday, ingrained and backgrounded behaviour toward plants that threatens many species of plants and animals (Hall 2009, 170–171).

RESPONSE TO THE IDENTIFIED ISSUES

Interspecies transition, co-existence and connection

In 2008, a group of researchers and scientists from the fields of biology, biotechnology, agriculture, practical philosophy and theology produced the *Rheinauer Theses on the Rights of Plants*, which aim to provide guidance on navigating ethical issues in the human–plant relationship. While acknowledging the differentness that may always remain beyond our full understanding, the document seeks to better define plants and protect their uniqueness by formulating a set of rights and theses, which require the capability to perceive the plant’s uniqueness, approaching it respectfully, and exclude treating plants as objects for use without limits (Blauen Institut 2008).

But what exactly does this mean and how do we establish and maintain respectfulness in human–plant relations? “Caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing



FIG. 2

APS, *Contract on plant adoption n. 006*, 2016, mixed technique on paper,
21 x 29,7 cm, APS archive.

ZZR, *Pogodba o posvojitvi rastline št. 006*, 2016, mešana tehnika na papir,
21 x 29,7 cm, arhiv ZZR.

**FIG. 3**

APS, *Adopt a Piece of Your Own Lawn*, 2016, event, GalerijaGallery, Ljubljana.
ZZR, *Posvojite kos čisto svoje zelenice*, 2016, dogodek, GalerijaGallery, Ljubljana.



FIG. 4

APS, *Autumn refuge at MGLC*, 2016, installation, International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC), Ljubljana.

ZZR, *Jesensko zatočišče v MGLC*, 2016, instalacija, MGLC, Ljubljana.



FIG. 5

APS, *Green Fingers on a Green Passe-partout*, 2018, workshop,
Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM), Ljubljana.

ZZR, *Zeleni prstki na zelenem paspartuju*, 2018, delavnica,
MSUM, Ljubljana.

more at the end of the day than at the beginning (Haraway 2008, 36). In this regard, Hrup and Hanžek identify contemporary participatory art practices as possible methodologies for discovering the potential for inter-species transition, co-existence and connection. In open, interdisciplinary practices, the authors recognise the potential for promoting sympathy, empathy and identification with “other” as a means of supporting closer connections and establishing relationships with the non-human other. By re-examining eco-socio-political and economic paradigms, such practices offer an alternative to the authoritarian and unidirectional delivery of knowledge, replacing it with active empowerment by means of collective consciousness.

Hrup and Hanžek put these ideas to the test in the project *Abandoned Plants Sanctuary* (APS).^① The long-standing interdisciplinary project combines art and ecology, and through organising actions, events and exhibitions engages with the local art scene and social space. At the time of writing the master’s thesis, the project was centred around a fictitious non-profit organization dedicated to supporting plants (particularly ornamental potted plants) in urban settings. Each plant that comes to the sanctuary is treated as an autonomous being with its own needs that must be met for it to live a flourishing and happy life. By signing the adoption contract, the new caretaker symbolically commits to caring for the plant by providing the right conditions for its healthy growth and development. (FIG. 2-4)

By adopting the structure of a pet shelter, Hanžek and Hrup conceive a “world of play”, which, despite being only slightly different from the familiar existing forms, creatively generates a completely new experience. This invites individuals to participate, deviating from their daily routines and transcending the conventional patterns of behaviour; in this way, they acquire a personal experience which offers them the opportunity to perceive reality from a different perspective. This raises questions about the relationship between humans and plants, ethics, environmental protection and anthropocentric models of existence. However, the authors do not provide answers; instead, these emerge spontaneously during events, happenings, workshops and public debates through participation of the public.

①

Since 2016, the Abandoned Plants Sanctuary has been operating as a cultural association. As of writing this publication, the project has been in existence and active for almost eight years. At the end of 2020, after being hosted

for two years at Teren Experimental Space, the sanctuary moved to the Krater Creative Lab, where it operates as an affiliated independent project (krater.si).

One such event, organized under the auspices of APS and held in collaboration with GalerijaGallery, was titled *Adopt a Piece of Your Own Lawn*. During the exhibition, the Sanctuary collaborated with the gallery on the maintenance of the 12 m² section of lawn displayed at the exhibition, which had to be tended, watered and removed after the exhibition. APS thus organised a closing event at which visitors could “save a piece of lawn”, giving it a new lease of life. The event featured a picnic on the lawn, which grew smaller and smaller over time as the artists gradually placed the pieces of lawn into boxes accompanied by an adoption contract. Besides the opportunity to adopt a piece of lawn, visitors could also view an exhibition displaying prints of abandoned plants and a drawing of the lawn itself. (FIG. 3)

Drawing is the unifying element of most of APS’s activities, which utilise plant drawing as one of the main models through which artists and participants can communicate with plants in an unconventional manner. Drawing, traditionally considered the most direct expression of the artist, is in this case turned into a medium, a means of establishing contact with the plant. Through attention comparable to reistic observation and as such focused solely on the physical appearance of the plant, i.e. on tracing the contours of its leaves or flowers, twigs, dried leaves and similar, the participant connects with the essence of the plant, which would be unattainable by the rational mind. In workshops such as *Green Fingers on a Green Passe-partout* and *Green Lessons*, participants establish new relationships with plants by drawing and active observation, which is furthermore supported by the simple tasks of plant care. (FIG. 5)

The practice of the *Abandoned Plants Sanctuary* actively blurs the boundaries between art, ecology, pedagogical processes and everyday life. Instead of focusing on the final product, it prioritizes the process of creating a work of art, which by means of its participatory nature enables change in both the individual and the environment, and promotes the establishment of new relationships. APS activity prompts us to consider what new and different conditions and circumstances are proposing and, by focusing on the plant as an autonomous being, encourages us to reflect on the positioning of nature as an equal and key identity of social activity.

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