

Potted plants and other listening beings

Cassandra Miller & Marja Christians

When Marja proposed in February that we write an article together about *what plants listen to* for the summer edition of *Positionen* I said yes but without really knowing what it was I was agreeing to. February seems unreal to me now, its reference used to evoke memories of bad weather, depression, lethargy, and the knowledge that once it was over you would not have to relive it for another year – how funny that at present, it has become the last reflection I have of normal life before the outbreak.

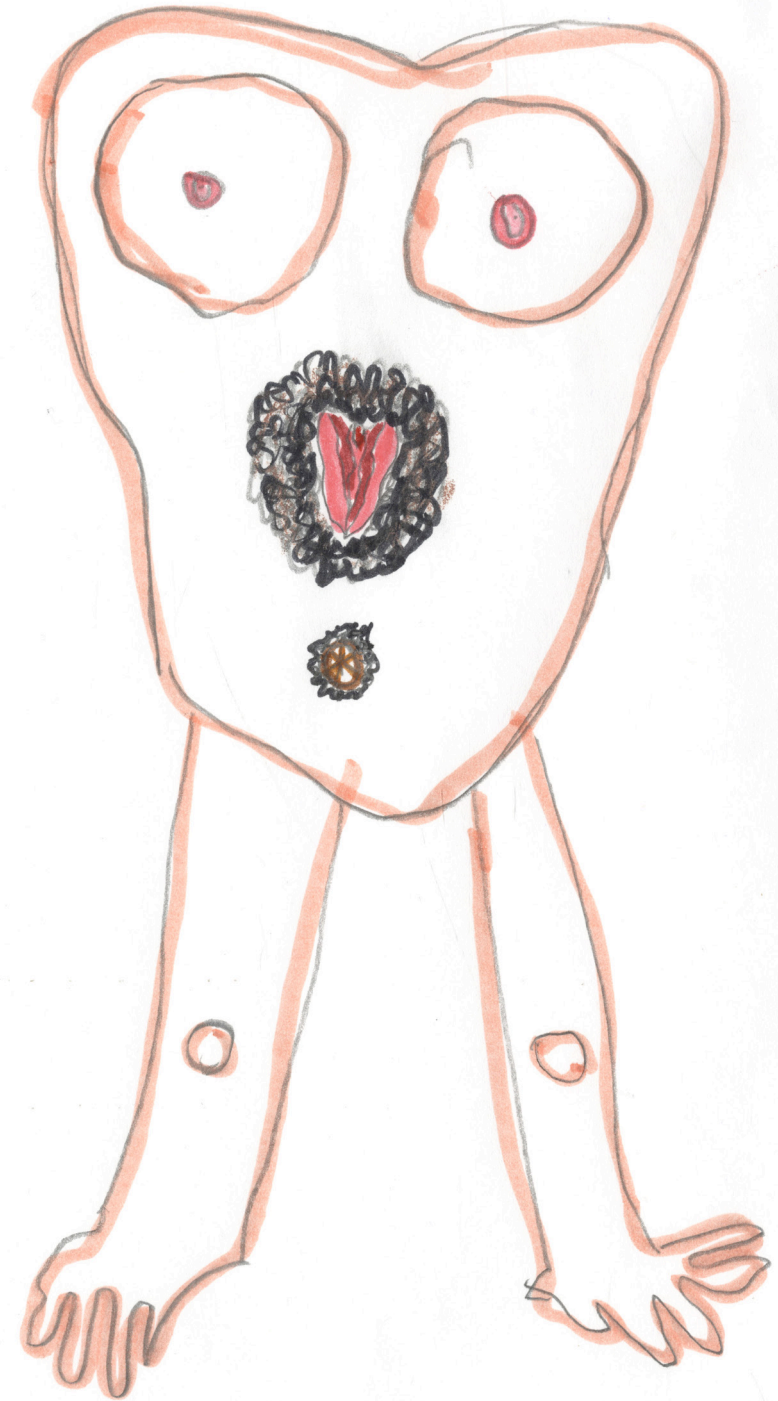
It's June, the world is on its head, I'm quarantined at my mother's house in Toronto, and had up until a few days ago forgotten about this article. Marja, despite everything that has happened to her: the pandemic, an earthquake in Zagreb, a concussion, and a transplant to Berlin, has forgotten nothing. She has a notebook where she keeps everything. She is able to adapt. She makes me think of the beginning of that Bruce Lee quote *Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water*. So, when she called me to remind me about the due date and asked how everything was going, I lied to her and said I was in the middle of it (now you know and so does she), then got off the phone, sat down at my desk, and attempted to write.

I had it in my head that I would be able to finish everything in one day – sheer hubris. The reality was: hours had passed, I talked to myself, I mass-murdered sentences, I stared into space, nothing happened, and when I looked down at the blank screen I was left with the sensation that seemed comparable to what someone might experience after losing a limb. The screen that should have been

full was somehow overwhelmingly empty. Not knowing where to turn (I literally know nothing about botany, I do not have a green thumb, I have killed cacti), I typed *what do plants hear* into Google and let the internet wash up endless pages that I took my time sifting through, hoping the distraction would produce some insight into the question proposed. I now know a lot about plants and could have gotten lost in an internet-hole for months but decided that Mort Garson's 1976 album *Mother Earth's Plantasia* was where I would end my search.

What caught my attention first was the album cover: a drawing of two people sitting cheek to cheek, holding hands, and appropriately nestled in the middle of the two lovers stands a tall leafy green plant. I stared at the cover for a while and thought about the last hand I had held, the last cheek I had touched, I looked at the plant flourishing on a mixture of sound waves, and affection, and thought to myself »Fucking February«. Mort Garson composed *Plantasia* so that it could be played for seedlings to help them grow – to penetrate through the mass. Germination is a state of awareness, that was what I had imagined being the message behind Mort's album. He was more than just a Canadian hippy burnout with a Moog synthesizer, he was my guide to getting this article done, and out of what was becoming blatantly apparent (to you as the reader and me as the writer) as a depression. *Do plants ever get depressed? Can they wither away and die of it? Is it genetic? Is it because of lack of sunlight and vitamin D? Is that why Germans and Canadians hate February?* I decided to

Die Zeichnungen im Special als auch das Cover wurden von Cassandra Miller angefertigt.



take a bath and listen to Mort's album instead of continuing with my first-year university existential tangent. There were four orchids in the bathroom, all of them stunning and poised like little avatars embodying the essences of all the eccentric people I had known in my life. I hopped in the tub and started writing questions down for them as though I were preparing for an interview. *Where does the name orchid come from? Are they happy at my mother's house? Do they like Mort Garson's Plantasia? Would they prefer Debussy? Or Grace Jones? How do they feel about isolation? Do they have memories? Do they feel our relationship with them is romantic, exploitative, infantilizing, abusive, performative, or dependant? Would they rather we just die so that bees can live? Are some plants selfish and others not?*

I focused on a white orchid boasting a pouty channel red lip. It was undeniably seductive, everything about it suggested sex, which was, of course, the entire point. I found myself saying out loud »I wonder what it's like to wear your genitals on your face?« I thought about what the world would look like if people had evolved from flowers. *If I wore my genitals on my face would my entire existence revolve around sex? Or would it mean almost nothing? Would it be reduced to another bodily function, detached from emotion, just a natural reaction to something or someone in the environment – like when pollen enters your nose and causes you to sneeze? If I bumped into someone on the street, would the collision cause us both to cum? Would we both get pregnant? Would I feel maternal, paternal, both, nothing?*

I looked down at the tub, my body looked so small, I had shrunk, I was a seedling, the tub was the fruit holding me at its center. I had so many questions but I couldn't tell who was doing the listening and who was doing the talking, was it the orchids or me? Were they waiting for an opening statement? I could see their tendrils reaching from outside of the pot, probing the room – little green

divining rods, sucking up a mixture of vapor, glucose, and sweat. Each orchid seemed to be aware of the presence of the others in the room, and it made me wonder if that awareness was brutally painful? They were together, but not as they should be, not in the place they should be, or in the earth, or the country, the climate where they should be. Germination is a state of awareness. Awareness is a state of germination. The effect is the same – good or bad, the result is irrevocable. Here we are in my mother's bathroom. You and me. You the orchids, and me the one writing this article...
And I?

I: I, as a seed, submerged in water, was only just becoming aware of my pulse, of my thirst, of my needs.

I, as a seed, could not stay in any one singular state forever.

I, as a seed, intrinsically knew my existence is a function, to keep existence going. A daisy chain. Secretion, absorption, fruit, repeat.

I, as a seed, was listening, to an exchange of corporal neologisms, a language of cells, of movement, reaction due to impulse, communicated to and from another impulse.

And then there was me: unable to hold such a fragile thought without (just by the realization that I was having it), causing it to disappear. How removed from nature, even my own, had I become. Awareness as germination. Germination as awareness. *I wondered if they were listening to me? To the tap dripping? To my respiration? I wonder what Marja has written? Does she know the name orchid comes from the greek ὄρχις (órchis) which means testicle? I bit the bottom half of my lip and felt the blood pulse through it. Why can't I just listen? I should just shut up.*

How brutally painful awareness can be.

Its tingling in the ends

It rained after some darkness and light. Now too. Drops are vibrating on the window sill, durch die Scheibe bis hier. Dripping steady with the background construction. Whatever buzzing in circles. Es brummt schon wieder.

Would be refreshing to hear a bit from the tree in front of the window, they seem letting themselves grow for leaves. These birds might be there, some hoping vibrations, die Töne schwingen bis hier. Tit, tit. Zip zip. And triiidiidiou, these bigger singers, singing all along the warm light rising and falling. Early and late. Klingt wie eine Einladung, getting lost in listening and memories (difficult especially on dry days). Dusk or dawn? That hard mud could maybe know it.

A plant in the forest prefers dawn or some similar changes to darkness. Can't trace a memory, its tingling in the ends. They would call it a day and listen to all the noises while the leaves activity is going down. On the extension of the window irregular patterns and some sense of safety or longing, getting this bunch of water and wind and branches of others.

No trace of a wet impact

Lots of things, up and down, liquids vibrating, all at once, in the silence here, inside the hard mud. Depending on the context the listening develops, dieser Lehm macht...diese...these...oh its really loud da und da, genau da und dahinten. Alles in allem, not too much sun, not too much rain. These hard mud keeps earth and bacteria and moist in it together, the life behind it, loud sometimes, schwingt durch den harten Lehm, double loud vibration.

Growing around hard mud amplifies the hearing. No trace of a wet impact of a storm. Sometimes something is missing. Not an extension, or lost of listening or other roots, eher wie das Geräusch

eines fallenden Asts, ganz nah, like getting into a storm bath together, and then being all fresh and a new, leaned up of old leaves, desires and what so ever.

The soil is so tasty after getting watered.

Still no water here but a wet wind from outside.

Wechselhafte Lichtaufnahme und Weiterverarbeitung

Trriitrii ttip ttip zwitsch zwitsch hhhust hrrrr. drrrr drr dumpf drr dufff, dff dff dff drrr duffff zwysch drr drrring drrr tatüü tatüüü. Wind wind wind tschup tschup

Alternating light absorption and processing. Der Wind hat sich gedreht.

The wind leaves traces about the clouds. The clouds too far to touch, to sense, to feel. Listening to the bacteria changing around, between light and shadow. What a place to be. Full warm light even when clouded. Less light is tasty too.

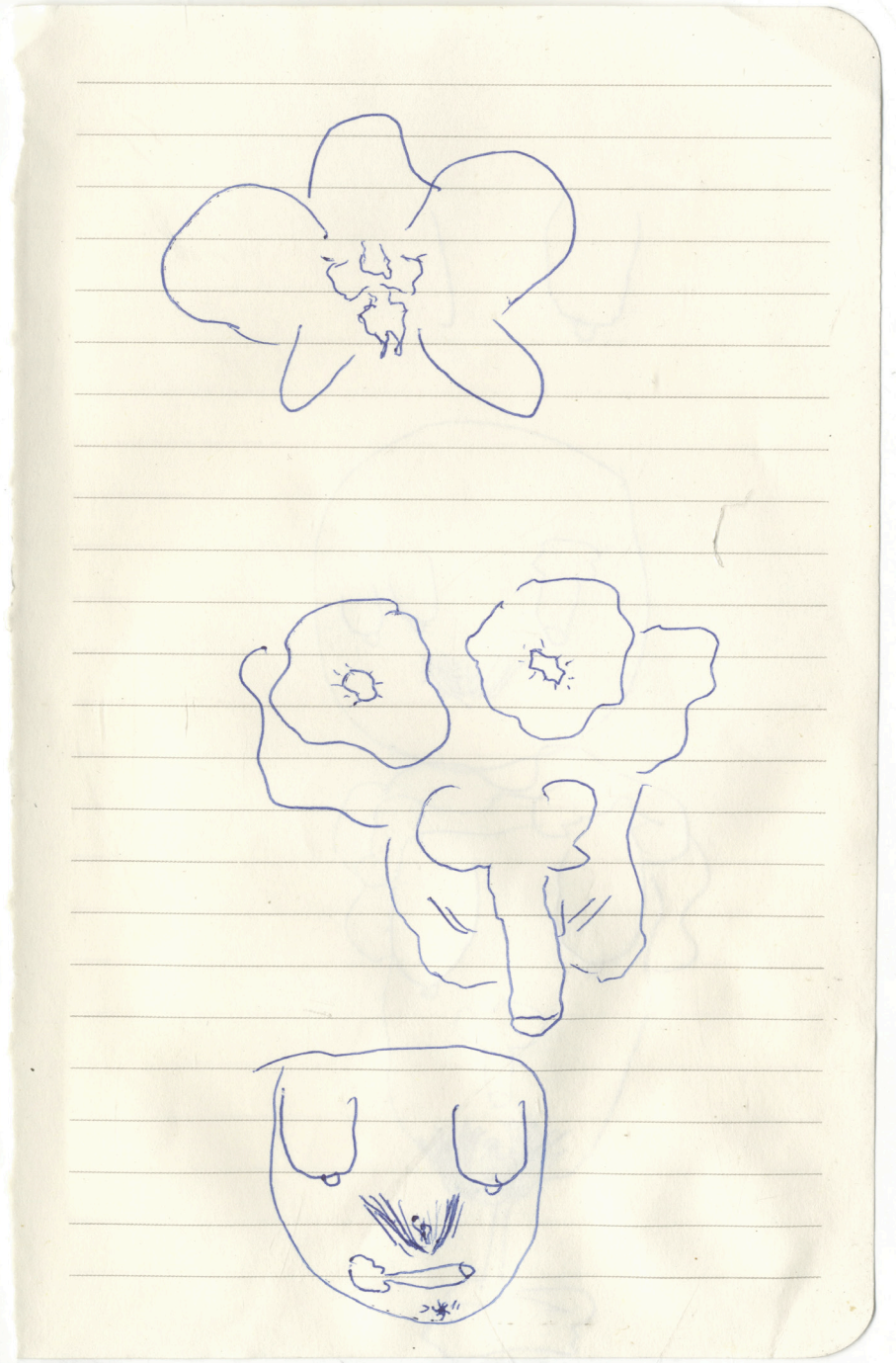
Reaching and trying trying, sometimes some listening. Licht, Schatten, Licht, Schatten, Schatten, light and shadow, sounds...different in the leaves. A day of busy bacteria, so noisy around all, ends. Regular vibrations, so loud next to the mud. Bathing in the light. Full warm light. Opening the capilars and listening. dscchdschuu u u u die Bakterien von unten. kschr schhhhhhhh noch eine von oben.

Great to be watered, all die gewässerte Erde, having it all and around. And then all these rhythms, vibrations entering, so much noises in the fine ends.

Hold it, it feels there.

We are witness here

We are in a bigger hard mud, der ganze Lehm vibriert, so much much, so much. Es kracht und



klappert, wenn etwas vorbeizieht, zwischen trocken und zu feucht, gerade zu viel, no balance here, heiß, es schwitzt. Machtkritische Pflanzenableger*innen, ja wir wissen das wir klein scheinen. Klein und schwitzig, mittlerweile größer, sweat plant sweat. sweatplantsweat.tumblr.com. Sticky air und viele menschliche Tiere ein und aus, sprechen untereinander, gestresste Stimmen schwingen an dem harten Lehm hier. Silent nights, silent mornings. The busy world starts am späten Vormittag. How could we sense that we are an institutional plant? All das Telefongeläute, Tastengeklappere, we almost never get touched. So viel Gelabber, und auch Gefluhe und weiter den Tag und dann alle paar Sommer-Winter-Frühling mal ein größere Lehmform, dann vibriert noch lauter das auf und ab der Stimmen. Unterschiedlich, schneidend, müde, klar, ach ja so unterschiedlich auch wieder nicht.

We came here with a song, talk, Unterschrift. We are witness here, we carry memory and remind: care for the daily action, care for Machtstrukturen, regularly instead of overdoing, water regularly, but not too much und nährend. Big institution life around us. Was wir da hören? Ja, sweatplantsweat.tumblr.com.

Irgendwas ist an den Tellern Das Licht hat gewechselt

Again changing, and we are trying to refind the light.

All work from the last light duration for nothing, during the darkness also still fine and then in the middle of the new light

There is this vibration of an approaching animal, it grabs the hard mud, we can hear it and takes everything and all us and now we are here, full light. What a changing, the attempts to communicate with the hard mud also failed, probably it changed the Zustand of its bacteria, they did.

It would have been nice to share more, until now the we space goes until them. they remain they for now.

We got something in the bacteria, one of the worst. Too much water everywhere, nothing tasty. Overwater. Everything feels numb and new bacteria, fungus enjoying the too wet. Growing so fast and affecting the roots, the deep listening is kind of cut, we go more up towards the light. We could be stressed but we are just giving up slowly space to the water, our bacteria develop odours and warmth. We can't listen anymore what is going on behind the hard mud, the amplification of the hard mud is wandering through watery nutritious empty lands. Overrated taste, and all water. BRACKIG.

The water overtakes the sounds of the mud. Drops of vibration. Traveling from side to side of the hard mud posing through rotten roots, it must be loud down there, we hear just the echo in the upper parts. smelly, we became also that bacteria. The parts of us down, so numb through the water and the fungus and the rest loud and...

Staunässe. Das Hörereignis.
Big beats.
In a numb setting.

We would have if we could have

Jeden Tag die Zugluft, Schritte, Tür, manchmal mehr, manchmal weniger, der harte Lehm, der Boden unter uns, alles voll mit Vibration, so viel. Wir versuchen schon in die andere Ecke zu wachsen, uns in dem kleinen harten Lehmgehäuse zu halten und wachsen seit Jahren, tagaus, tagein. Who cares? Abläufe, Rhythmen, immer dasselbe menschliche Tier, nicht jeden Tag, aber mehrmals die Woche, mit dem flatschigen Geräusch. Dieses Gerät klopft manchmal an unseren Topf, und manchmal werden wir verrückt. It all the time the same, busy times and summer times, its hot

and we are almost forgotten. Where are all these animals in the summer? Some summers we stay in the garden, in the beginning the sun so hot hot, burning burning.

If someone asks for a soundtrack from the perspective of an institutional plant, here we are, getting again a little Ableger. Wer wohl kommt und ihn, ein Teil von uns mitnimmt?

C.M. & M.C.
Toronto, Berlin, Zagreb 2020

C.M. und M.C. haben Wasser von verschiedenen Seiten des Atlantiks geschlürft. Cassandra Miller, ist Cassandra Miller und auch nicht, sie hatte Berlin in ihrem Herzen und gegenwärtig Montréal in ihrem Mund. Sie ist auch nicht die Cassandra Miller auf den Seiten 84-88. Marja Christians, ist nicht Marja Christians, sie spricht sechs Sprachen gut, sieben, wenn man die Stille mit einbezieht.

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