

The Plant Contract

Prudence Gibson

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Reviewed by Michael Richardson

SO MUCH OF THE SCHOLARLY AND PUBLIC ATTENTION PAID TO THE ANTHROPOCENE focuses on its vast scale: atmospheric and geologic transformation, species extinction, extractive capitalism, extreme weather, rising sea levels, to name but a few. In *The Plant Contract*, writer and scholar Prudence Gibson calls for intervention in ‘the massively distributed and globalized issue of climate change, in a small and localized way, human by human, artist by artist, plant by plant’ (9). The book is a timely, critical and provocative call for a very different relation to the vegetal world, one that is founded on ethics and politics that recognise the ‘multitude of subjectivities’ (9) to be found in plant life.

For Gibson, the way into a renewed and revived relation to the plant world is through art—and specifically bio-art that works with plants as the medium of expression. In keeping with the wider ethos of multispecies research in the humanities inspired by Donna Haraway and others, Gibson’s project is both decidedly aesthetic and explicitly feminist. As she notes, ‘the artworks discussed in this book are a reworking of the symbolics of nature and are real examples of restructuring women’s embodiment and passage into subjectivity, leaving room for sexual difference’ (23). Throughout the book, which discusses a host of artists and artworks alongside and in dialogue with an array of philosophical interlocutors, Gibson returns to this relation between gender, sex, plant life and the human.

The book is firmly situated in Critical Plant Studies, an emerging area of transdisciplinary research that recognises that plants have capacities beyond human perception and that this demands we rethink our relation to the vegetal, in particular our assumptions about subjectivity or its lack. As Gibson makes clear, Critical Plant Studies is very much a response to our era of ecological crisis, one that aims ‘to identify how these disruptive times affect culture and society’s relations with the plant world, and to document the philosophical and aesthetic fallout’ (7). As a wider project, then, Critical Plant Studies aims to bring the

insights of humanities research to bear on botany, biology and other scientific disciplines in much the same way that science studies has sought to introduce new perspectives and debates into science more broadly. Gibson's contribution to that work centres on the aesthetic. As she writes, 'there is a need to negotiate the criteria of aesthetic value of current plant-based and plant-theoretical art work' (16).

But *The Plant Contract* is about more than new aesthetic criteria and values, even if this has been a long-standing and important project of Gibson's, notably documented in her 2015 study *Janet Laurence: The Pharmacy of Plants*. Rather, Gibson makes the urgent case for a fundamentally new foundation to plant-human relations: a plant contract, 'an act of resuscitation, a breath of renewed life' (11). This notion of the plant contract has a clear conceptual lineage. It takes up the philosopher Michel Serres' idea of the 'natural contract', developed in a 1995 book of the same title, which argued that renewing the lost bond between humans and the earth required a pact, a contract of a similar nature to that proposed by Rousseau for the social and political realm:

If a natural contract brought our attention to the collectivity and the totality of the world, the plant contract continues that tradition, by bringing attention to the totality of the vegetal world and the way in which art punctures that world to disrupt devastating human habits.
(11)

Alongside Serres, Gibson maintains an ongoing conversation with the feminist cultural theorist Luce Irigaray, plant philosopher Michael Marder and process philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, among others. Gibson has a knack for distilling key philosophical ideas and relating them neatly to her project, although it should be noted that those looking for an intently philosophical engagement with those thinkers should look elsewhere as Gibson's interest is very much in how they illuminate the art-plant nexus rather than concepts in the abstract.

Plant art is very much at the core of the book. Numerous artists and works make appearances in the text, with anywhere from a handful of lines to a dozen pages devoted to them. Gibson supplements her analysis with interview data from a number of the key figures in the book, particularly those based in Australia. This approach means that the book covers a huge array of case studies, which demonstrates the vitality and importance of plant art and the necessity of understanding its aesthetics, ethics and politics on its own terms. At the same time, the breadth of examples makes individual engagements rather fleeting and there might be significant value in future work that offers deeper, differently generative encounters with certain works. Gibson's approach, however, plays to

her strengths as a writer—pace, energy, evocative description and a talent for finding commonalities across unexpected scales and sites.

Breadth, too, gives weight to the central premise of the book: namely, ‘human sovereignty over nature has been occurring for too long’ (25) and that we rewrite our agreement with the natural world. In Gibson’s writing, the plant contract is a capacious thing; a concept that builds across the book, developing life and nuance as she considers each new vignette and philosophical intervention. It is, as she writes, ‘a story of human relations with the natural world’ but also only the beginning of a renewed relation, ‘a means of opening up deeper discussions about human relations with plants’ (172). Gibson makes her case across six chapters, which she asks us to think of as ‘clauses in a Plant Contract’ (19). The chapters are organised thematically, rather than by specific sites or artists. Each takes up a concept—the wasteland, the Green Man motif, robotany, bio rights, eco-feminism, ungrounding—and uses it to renegotiate an aspect of human-plant aesthetic relations.

In the first chapter, ‘The Wasteland and the Wilding: The Aesthetic of Abandoned and Reclaimed Green Spaces’, examines works at the ‘collision between nature and culture’ (29), such as Kris Verdonk’s art-science ecosystems and Tega Brain’s wetland-in-a-laundromat, to reveal the wasteland as ‘a series of imaginative and speculative spaces of resistance... with the potential for cultural impact and with an ability to change perceptions’ (31). The next chapter, ‘Green Man: Human-Plant Hybrids’, takes its inspiration from the Green Man icon of medieval artistry, used to decorate churches and other buildings. Tracing that history before turning to how artists use cutting edge science techniques, such as Eduardo Kac’s inscription of DNA into plants or Dan Harvey and Heather Ackroyd’s experiments with new grass strains, Gibson shows plants ‘change our perception of ourselves’ (74) to make visible our hybridisation.

Turning from human-plant hybrids to the integration of the vegetal and the robotic, the third chapter examines how ‘robotany probes issues of human desire for plant life, to merge, to become one, to seek the original form’ (75). Here the intersection of science and art comes to the fore through case studies of robotics labs in which the material significance of artistic experimentation is apparent, as ‘these robotanical artworks and engineering works are studies in future relationships, future means of agriculture and better models for understanding our place in the world’ (91). In the fourth chapter, ‘Bio Rights: Earth of Agonies and Eco-Punks’, Gibson addresses radical ‘eco-punks’ such as Turpin/Crawford and Anna McMahan and the writer Cormac Cullinan to imagine a foundation of shared rights for the Plant Contract.

The fifth chapter ‘acknowledges the history of feminising the planet but reanimates and recasts that process by introducing the water lily as a breathing becoming-woman’ (131). It draws on the long history of eco-feminism to re-read Claude Monet’s lilies alongside contemporary artworks and the process philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari in its explicitly feminist rendering by Elizabeth Grosz. In the final chapter, ‘Ungrounding Plant Life: The After-Effects’, the question of how plants become removed from their habitation in soil or water, becoming ungrounded through magic and medicine, care and cure. Returning to the familiar territory of Janet Laurence’s bio-art and Michael Marder’s philosophy, Gibson undertakes the vital task of decentring the human from primacy on the earth. She argues, persuasively, that we need new ontological ground for a viable plant contract—and new ways of thinking thought itself, too.

If all this seems ambitious, then all the better. *The Plant Contract* is a paean for a different kind of relation to the vegetal world, one founded in a more contemplative, attentive and caring mode of living with plant life. But it is also a call for art, artists and humanities scholarship to be part of that conversation on an equal footing with plants and the scientists who can all too easily monopolise plant knowledge. As Gibson writes, the ‘capacity of art to translate complex issues and render visible ideas and concepts otherwise difficult to discern, makes it a critical accompaniment to the silent rising of the discourse of plant sentience and vegetal thinking’ (177). As this much needed and passionately argued book makes clear, a Plant Contract is not a side issue in responding the Anthropocene but rather a fundamental reworking of the relationship between humans and the vegetal upon which our collective lives depend.

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