

THE
floral
TONGUE



a conversation
with plants

The Floral Tongue

a conversation with plants

Nature is comprised of many species. From our often-anthropocentric perspective, humans seem to be the most effective communicators, capable of expressing complex concepts, hypothetical ideas, and intangible feelings. Animals would likely place second, not necessarily in their own right, but by the human standards of communication: namely, they are capable of vocalization and facial expression, which are so integral to our own conversation. They may not use them in the same way, but the similarities can nonetheless affect human perception of their communication.

Then there are plants. Plants are not communicators in the way people are, nor in the way people perhaps expect or interpret animals to be. They cannot speak in any way audible to humans, nor can they use body language as humans are accustomed to.

Nonetheless, plants speak to us every day. Their speech comes through our own ascribed meaning, and through the witness they bear to history. Plants can tell us about themselves and about ourselves. They can communicate information to each other wholly separate from that which they impart on us, but they are far from mute.

We are responsible for our attentiveness to these voices, and we are responsible for interpreting them. So the question that then belies us is this: is it possible to divorce ourselves, our human perspective and experiences, from the interpretations of life and experiences of flora? Further, is this even to be expected?

There may not be, perhaps, one definitive answer, but rather several roads to “plant translation,” running parallel at times, and crossing at others. Three articles in *Antennae* magazine, issue 52, explore the unique ways we ascribe meaning to plants- and they ascribe meaning to us.

In “The Pansy Project,” the language of plants is discussed as a conduit of human intention to human reception, by which we ascribe personal, subjective signification to flora, which is transmitted to the next observer and reintegrated into the human experience. Specifically, artist Paul Harfleet chose to plant pansies at the locations where homophobic abuse occurred. He discusses how pansies already have some human-designated implications; pansy is used to “refer to an effeminate or gay man” and the word itself originates from the French

word that means “to think” (Harfleet). Both interpretations suit the goals of the project, but Harfleet wants to expand the language of pansies further to encompass the growth of becoming stronger and greater through one’s experiences as well as the power of counteracting trauma with a positive action.

Further, Harfleet explains that “The fact that the work can be seen simultaneously in many ways is something that helps spark conversation” (Harfleet). The pansy becomes a springboard for multifaceted discussions beyond any potentially rigid “translations” of what the flower is saying. However, this type of flower-speak is, at its root, a human language. Just like a red rose symbolizing love is a meaning crafted by people and not inherent to nor rooted in the flower itself, the voice of the pansy here is adopted.

This adopted tongue is a language nonetheless. It is a way to communicate nonverbally through plants. As Harfleet says, “The intervention acts as a symbol of a story, not always revealed, and suggests that a place of trauma can be acknowledged and transformed into a location of healing and activism” (Harfleet). Though plants cannot share details with us, they can share broad strokes of intention, history, and symbolism.

In contrast, an interview with Max Martin and Carlos Morera of The Cactus Store, looks closer at what plants tell us about themselves. These shop owners and cactus enthusiasts are similarly happy to have humans project their own interpretation onto plants, but in this case, they are advocates for anthropomorphism with the goal of breaking down the previously objective relationship between humanity and ecology.

Martin and Morera care for and sell cacti with the emphasis that they “are one of a kind, individual vegetal beings with histories and identities” (Martin). They listen to the cacti speak based on physical cues- markings, statures- understanding and appreciating the cactus’ unique history and personal needs. By looking at what a plant tells them about its individuality, they hope to foster a stronger, more empathetic connection between people and the natural world in order to preserve it and help it thrive.

This is a process of listening to the plant itself, not the human speech transmitted through it. At the same time, it is wholly accepting of human interpretation.

The third perspective, however, “[seeks] to cultivate an anti-anthropogenic kind of attention” towards plants (de Carvalho). Selena de Carvalho, in “Beware of imposters (the secret life of flowers),” discusses her installation



which aims to remove the filter of our personal experiences and motives, from the plants' experiences. Through this, she hopes that people can become witnesses to what the plants will tell them, and to use "creative translation to 'speak' for those that cannot speak, or those that speak but cannot be understood by human ears" (de Carvalho). Though humans may be responsible for translating the plants' speech, the focus is to be as true as possible to the plant testimony while minimizing the tint of human bias.

In the immersive exhibit, de Carvalho strips away one's sense of self through audio which guides the participant into a mindset of imagination. By removing oneself from one's personal bias and hypercritical thinking patterns or logic, one can proceed to experience the exhibit more objectively and with fewer inhibitions. After forming a new picture about the plants and their history and meaning, the participant's self is reintegrated, allowing them to become personally, and proactively, connected to this new experience.

The concept itself is hinged on a single orchid in a graveyard. It is the last of its kind and has prompted de Carvalho to discuss and explore the conflict between certain human values- order and beauty- and the signs of a thriving natural world- a less aesthetically organized system.

De Carvalho wants the plants to be heard as they call for change, for their own ecological needs. She wants the plants to be heard as they tell the story of history, from changing landscapes to razed fields, from thriving ecodiversity to species extinction.

In this case, there is no symbolism in the plants' language. There is only a cry of "look what has become of us!" and a question of "what has been done to make it this way, and how can you change it now?" It is no longer about what humans perceive about plants, but, in a sense, what plants perceive about humans.

It is an impossible task to divorce human experience from our translations of plant communication altogether. In part, this is due to the entwinement of nature in all its causes and effects. Further, though, we will never be able to sift out all human perspective and bias. Our interpretations will be through the cleanest, clearest lens possible, but a lens nonetheless.

This is not a bad thing. As long as humans are doing their best to care for each other (supporting each other and spreading awareness like in the Pansy Project) and nature around them (cactuses, a lone orchid, and all the plants that bear witness or need human witnesses of their own), then the words of plants are being heard loud and clear.

de Carvalho, Selena. "Beware of imposters (the secret life of flowers)." *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Autumn 2020. pp. 45-57.

Harfleet, Paul. "The pansy project." *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Autumn 2020. pp. 80-93.

Martin, Max and Morera, Carlos. "Cactus Store." *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Autumn 2020. pp. 133-138.

