

*What
can we
learn from
working
with
plants?*

Darja Zaitsev

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This two-piece master's thesis examines the artistic practices of six contemporary visual artists and designers working with living plants. Instead of being interested in mere representations, the thesis aims to grasp the materiality in the interviewed artists' processes, and to provide curatorial spaces for human and non-human encounters and discourses. With the framework of curatorial and artistic research, new materialism and post-humanism, this study asks what we can learn from working with living plants. How are new materialism and post-humanism reflected in artistic and curatorial practice? And how could these concepts, and curating as a site of knowledge production, affect our worldview, and finally our future?

Through a qualitative research process using six artist interviews and curatorial booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*, the study raises questions about the common responsibility and self-objectification. It cultivates a way of thinking not only about plants, but also with them, and with and in the environment. The study contributes to a change to a more sustainable future.

Keywords: new materialism, post-humanism, diffraction, object-oriented ontology, plant-thinking, plants, contemporary art, curating

Abstrakti

Tämä kaksiosainen pro gradu -tutkielma tarkastelee kuuden kasvien kanssa työskentelevän nykytaiteilijan ja -suunnittelijan taiteellista praktiikkaa. Pelkkien representaatioiden sijaan tutkielma pyrkii tavoittamaan taiteilijoiden työskentelyn materiaalisuuden, sekä tarjoamaan kuratoriaalisia tiloja ihmisten ja ei-ihmisten välisille kohtaamisille ja diskursseille. Taiteellisesta ja kuratoriaalisesta tutkimuksesta, uusmaterialismista ja posthumanismista koostuvan viitekehyksen avulla tämä tutkimus kysyy mitä voimme oppia elävien kasvien kanssa työskentelystä. Kuinka uusmaterialismi ja posthumanismi näkyvät taiteellisissa ja kuratoriaalisissa käytännöissä? Ja kuinka nämä konseptit, mukaan lukien kuratointi tiedon tuottamisen välineenä, vaikuttavat maailmankuvaamme, ja lopulta tulevaisuuteemme?

Tämä laadullinen tutkimus herättää kysymyksiä yhteisestä vastuusta ja itseobjektifoinnista käyttäen apunaan kuutta taiteilijahaastattelua ja kuratoriaalista teosta *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*. Sen sijaan, että ajattelisimme vain kasveja, tutkimus kultivoi tapaa ajatella kasvien kanssa niiden omassa ympäristössä. Tutkimus edesauttaa muutosta kestävämpään tulevaisuuteen.

Avainsanat: uusmaterialismi, posthumanismi, diffraktio, objekti-orientoitunut ontologia, plant-thinking, kasvit, nykytaide, kuratointi

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1. Introduction

The past few years of studying in Visual Culture and Contemporary Art; Curating, Managing and Mediating Art (CuMMA) master's program at Aalto University have truly changed my thinking. Not only about curating and exhibition-making, but also about the production of knowledge. However, having a background in clothing design, in my experience CuMMA studies have emphasised the immaterial, theoretical, conceptual and societal aspects of contemporary art and curating, paying less attention to the actual objects of art. This is why in this research I wanted to concentrate on the artistic, hands-on, material processes of contemporary art practices, and working with living plant material.

At the beginning of my thesis process I was very concerned about the precarious working conditions of culture and art workers. I was eager to find new alternatives and sustainable economical ways of being together. Trying to come up with these new ways of working, being interested in communities and new kinds of art institutions, I started to pay more attention to our current ways of living and what kind of effects they have on our planet and the environment. As cliché as it might sound, the older I have become the more I have started to appreciate living further from the city centre and closer to the sea and forests. Gardening, picking mushrooms and berries, and spending time in the nature have become my new hobbies. I love growing houseplants

from small clippings, to watch them grow new roots and feeling ever so happy when planted into bigger pots. Living close to the nature in an apartment full of houseplants made me think whether there is more to them than meets the eye. Could the plants actually feel and sense the environment like we do, and whether they are more “alive” than we thought that they were. The subject of this study rises from my personal interests and experiences as a curator, and from the interviewed artists’ practices and descriptions of their working processes with plants.

1.1. Aim and research questions

In this two-piece master’s thesis I study the work of six Finnish and international contemporary artists and designers working with living plants. I have used the interview data and artists’ quotations to compile a curatorial booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*¹ as the artistic part of this thesis. I am interested in the ecological and environmental challenges artists and curators—not to mention everyone else—have to face in these contemporary times. In the academic part at hand, I examine the interviewees’ artistic practices through the theoretical concepts of ‘new materialism’ and ‘post-humanism’, and ask *what can we learn from working with living plants?* Can new materialism and post-humanism help us to start seeing plants differently? How are these theoretical concepts

¹ See *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants* booklet.

reflected in artistic and curatorial practices? And finally, how could all this eventually affect our worldview, and our future?

For this study I interviewed six Finnish and international artists and designers based in Helsinki and Southern Finland. The interviews were made in spring 2017 and they were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Because most of the artists have had several exhibitions within the past few years in Helsinki and nearby cities, to me it made no sense to create another white cube exhibition and display the same artworks in the framework of my research. Curating a small booklet based on the interviews seemed like a more proper format—as poetic and delicate like some of the plants mentioned and discussed during the research process. To me curatorial practice is a way of researching and experiencing the world around us. This thesis offers new ways of thinking about plants in relation to their materiality and being. It hopefully encourages people to be more sensitive and responsible for the environment and the world we live in.

1.2. Previous studies

During the past few years there has been a rise of popularity of plants in contemporary art. There are comparatively few books and articles written about artists working especially with living plants, and most of them focus more on environmental issues and climate change in general. In his article *Contemporary Art at the Tipping Point* curator and writer Barnaby Drabble argues that the COP21 Conference of Climate Change in Paris in 2015 was a notably historical moment for environmentally engaged art². The event brought together practitioners with very little in common, but sharing the same concern over the environment and forming temporary alliances. The Paris conference involved huge amount of artists commenting upon, fundraising and protesting about climate change, artworks taking variety of forms and conceptual strategies (e.g. Olafur Eliasson's and Minik Rosing's famous work *Ice Watch*, 2015). After the conference there has been many initiatives trying to continue the legacy of the meeting. For example, *Creative Climate Leadership* is a program for artists and cultural professionals to chart the dimensions of climate change. The program encourages to take action through training courses exploring the role of culture and creativity in responding to environmental challenges³.

These examples inspired my own thesis. However, aesthetes and writers Yrjö Sepänmaa's, Liisa Heikkilä-Palo's and Virpi

² Drabble 2016.

³ Julie's Bicycle 2016.

Kaukio's compilation *Vihreä Päänsärky! Taidetta siemenestä kompostiin* [Green headache! Art from seed to compost]⁴ comes a bit closer to my own field of interest. The book introduces the latest green art⁵ projects in Finland and abroad, from living art installations to interior design, and landscape architecture. The compilation accompanied the exhibition *Green Land – Blooming City* (Vihreä maa – Kukkiiva kaupunki), which was on display at Kerava Art Museum in the Spring-Summer 2017. Unfortunately, both the book and the exhibition present quite tame examples of green art, and pay more attention to the vast and complex relationship between man and nature rather than actually concentrating on plants. However, animator Faye Kahn's article *A Plant as Familiar* interestingly studies the use of plants in contemporary art focusing especially on the houseplant and its capability to relate to a human subject⁶. Being innocent, attractive and defenceless makes plants sympathetic individuals with capability of representing human feelings and opinions depending on the context. I will return to this article later on in the chapter 1.5. *Living plant art*, in which I also present few contemporary art projects using living plant material. Additionally, there are some books and articles written about the use of seeds, fungi, mycorrhiza⁷ and other organisms in contemporary art which I am not going to take into

⁴ Sepänmaa, Heikkilä-Palo & Kaukio (eds.) 2017.

⁵ Term brought up by Sepänmaa (2017). Freshness, liveliness and temporality are some characteristics of green art. Green artworks are typically infinite or lacking clear boundaries, variable in time, ephemeral, and dependent on care and nurturing. More widely, green art also deals with the green environment, such as gardens and recreation grounds.

⁶ Kahn 2013.

⁷ Symbiotic association between a fungus and the roots of a vascular host plant.

consideration in this study. Most of the studies mentioned previously consider plants as mere objects and tools for realising artworks, but fail to see them as agents and a vital part of the material artistic processes. In this research I want to contemplate on the idea of working *with*, not only *from* and *on*, living plants.

As a university subject, the field of curating is relatively new. There are only few master's thesis written on the topic of curatorial research, curatorial agency or curatorial work in the Department of Art of Aalto University, Finland. In one of the latest ones, Eva Forsman examines the reality of the current financialised condition in the field of arts and culture. *The current condition: Whether we like it or not but what about the future* discusses the conditions of the neoliberal economic ideology together with individual's participation opportunities in the society⁸. Additionally, Selina Väliheikki's thesis *Field tripping. Crossing ruptures, straying in pathways, passing thresholds – searching for a way in and out in curatorial positioning* reflects, questions and theorises the practices and tendencies of curating. It analyses the process of positioning oneself within the sphere of curatorial practice⁹. Most of the studies at Aalto University mainly focus on case studies: on specific institutions and their modes of operation, or on certain exhibitions, artists, and events or art festivals. Same goes for art historical studies in the University of Helsinki, where the studies also tend to focus on a specific era in art history. However, I was

⁸ Forsman 2017.

⁹ Väliheikki 2015.

happy to discover Enni Niemelä's master's thesis *Ruumis, affekti ja tulemisen prosessi* [Body, Affect, and the Process of Becoming], made in the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies at the University of Turku, in which she examines and analyses artist Heidi Tikka's video installation *Mother, Child (2011/2000)* from three perspectives: feminist art research, affect theory and new materialism¹⁰. Niemelä's thesis has helped me to formulate my own research questions and research structure.

There are a few contemporary art projects in Finland related to my research interests. Through the collaborative network of remote residencies for artists and other participants, *Frontiers in Retreat* is trying to generate an understanding of ecological concerns and larger global processes¹¹. *The Mustarinda Association* promotes the diversity of culture and nature and the ecological rebuilding of the society through the connection between art and science¹². Terike Haapoja, Alma Heikkilä, IC-98, Antti Laitinen, Tuomas A. Laitinen, Antti Majava, Nabb+Teeri, Hans Rosenström, Nestori Syrjälä, and Elina Vainio, just to name a few, are all Finnish contemporary artists whose practices involve working with plants, trees, animals and other non-human beings. They also share the concern of the current environmental and ecological situation.

¹⁰ Niemelä 2015.

¹¹ Frontiers in Retreat 2017.

¹² The Mustarinda Association 2017.

1.3. Influencers and structure

Epistemologically the academic part of this thesis adheres to feminist research, contemporary art studies, new materialist research, post-humanist studies, and studies of curatorial practices. I will open my theoretical framework with new materialism, post-humanism, and artistic and curatorial research. I will use philosophical, biological, and curatorial literature to analyse the data gathered through the interviews. The curatorial booklet is based freely on artists' quotations accompanied by plant illustrations. The booklet provides an artistic space for new utterances and articulations on the topic.

One of the most inspirational books I have encountered during my research process has been Stefano Mancuso's and Alessandra Viola's *Loistavat kasvit. Mitä tiedämme kasveista ja niiden älykkyydestä* [Magnificent plants. What do we know about plants and their intelligence]¹³. Reading the book together with performance artist Essi Kausalainen's interview has opened my eyes to the world of plants, and guided me to other relevant theoretical and philosophical sources, such as philosopher Michael Marder's thoughts on *plant-thinking*¹⁴, philosopher and game designer Ian Bogost's and philosopher Levi Bryant's approach to *object-oriented ontology*¹⁵, feminist researcher and zoologist

¹³ Mancuso & Viola, 2017.

¹⁴ Marder 2013.

¹⁵ Bogost 2012; Bryan 2011.

Donna Haraway's concepts of *diffraction* and *staying with the trouble*¹⁶, and philosopher Bruno Latour's notions on the politics of nature¹⁷.

Art historian Katve-Kaisa Kontturi's doctoral thesis Following *The Flows of Process. A New Materialist Account of Contemporary Art*¹⁸ and physicist and feminist Karen Barad's article *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*¹⁹ has helped me to understand the concept of new materialism, and how to conceptualise the materiality in artistic and curatorial processes in relation to my research topic. With the support of Jean-Paul Martinon's *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*²⁰ and Paul O'Neill's, Mick Wilson's, and Lucy Steeds' *The Curatorial Conundrum. What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?*²¹ I have been able to clarify my own curatorial starting points. Philosopher and music theorist Henk Borgdoff's notions on artistic research have helped me to reflect the artistic and curatorial processes in relation to my field of interest.

This two-piece master's thesis is divided into six parts. In this first part I tell briefly about my research interests, study literature, research data, previous studies on the topic, and

¹⁶ Haraway 2000; 2003; 2008; 2016.

¹⁷ Latour 2004.

¹⁸ Kontturi 2012a.

¹⁹ Barad 2003.

²⁰ Martinon, Jean-Paul (ed.) 2013.

²¹ O'Neill, Wilson & Steeds (eds.) 2016.

give some current contemporary art examples of artists working with living plants. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the academic part are all named after the occurring themes of the booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*. In each chapter I will introduce my theoretical and methodological starting points, and analyse the interview data through them. In the second part, I will talk briefly about feminist research and the nature of knowledge in artistic and curatorial production, and elaborate on my curatorial choices and the process of making the booklet. In the third section, I will dive more in detail into the world of new materialism, and concentrate on the importance of matter and materiality in artistic and curatorial practices. In the fourth part, I will contemplate on post-humanism, object-oriented ontology, and plant-thinking in relation to working with living plants. In the fifth section, I present my conclusions and answer my research questions, reflect on the process, examine the reliability of the research, and give some examples on how to develop the thesis topic further. Finally, the sixth part of this two-piece master's thesis is the curatorial booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*. The booklet is a collection of plants illustrations and quotations based on the artists' interviews, which also functions as a separate curatorial outcome.

1.4. Friends with plants

For this master's thesis I interviewed six Finnish and international contemporary artists and designers based in Helsinki and Southern Finland. Their practices have lately involved working with living plant material. The interviewees were performance artist Essi Kausalainen, sculptor Raimo Saarinen, photographer Maija Savolainen, painter Ilona Valkonen, service designer Yiyang Wu, and sculptor Denise Ziegler.

Essi Kausalainen has studied performance art and theory in Turku Arts Academy and the Theatre Academy of Finland. Her work is inspired by plant-thinking, feminist science studies, new materialism and quantum physics. Lately she has been interested in interspecies communication and the intimacy of the organic and inorganic bodies²². I got interested in Kausalainen's practice after reading her article *For the Love of Plants*²³ from Mustekala independent cultural magazine in spring 2017. I was not all that familiar with Kausalainen's practice before, even though I did have the chance to see her solo exhibition *Newcomers*²⁴, which investigates the idea of symbiosis at SIC gallery in Helsinki in autumn 2016. Unfortunately, at the time my thesis topic was still at an early stage of development.

²² SIC 2016; Somerset House 2017.

²³ Kausalainen 2016.

²⁴ SIC 10.9.–10.9.2016.

However, I saw sculptor Raimo Saarinen's artwork *Neosgaia* for the first time at *Kuvan Kevät 2016*²⁵ spring exhibition for graduate students of Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki. The sculptural work of plant islands floating in the air stuck with me, and after deciding on my research topic in early January 2017, I knew immediately who to interview. During that time Saarinen was finalising his master studies in Academy of Fine Arts at the Department of Sculpture. He graduated in early summer 2017. Saarinen works mainly with installation and sculpture, and is interested in the human relation with nature and the contemporary perceptions of nature²⁶.

I got a hint about Maija Savolainen's artistic practice from my thesis supervisor Henna Harri. Sadly I missed Savolainen's solo exhibition *The Matter of Light and Fuchsia gotenborg*²⁷ at Photography Gallery Hippolyte in February 2016. The exhibition comprised of photographs and a physiological plant experiment, with the emphasis on different properties of light. Savolainen has studied photography in Aalto University's School of Arts, Design and Architecture and biology at University of Turku. She is interested in the photographic expression defined by sunlight. In addition to photography, she works with installations and site specific art addressing the effect of light on a living subject.²⁸

²⁵ Kuvan Kevät 7.–29.5.2016.

²⁶ Uniarts Helsinki 2016.

²⁷ Photographic Gallery Hippolyte 5.–28.2.2016.

²⁸ Photographic Gallery Hippolyte 2016.

Ilona Valkonen has graduated from the Department of Painting at Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki in 2006. She is interested in collegial energy, botany, space poetry, raw materials, and garbage. Since 2015 she has been conducting *Vieno Motors* performances mixing anarchist botany and found objects.²⁹ After moving to Helsinki in autumn 2014, and attending several gallery openings, I came across with the early development stage of *Vieno Motors* performance at gallery Sinne's group exhibition *Yhdeksän elämän museo* [The Museum of Nine Lives]³⁰ in late autumn 2014. This thesis was a perfect opportunity to interview Valkonen and to hear more about her plant performance practice.

I heard about Aoi Yoshizawa's and Yiyang Wu's *Plant Hotel* project first time in autumn 2014. When I was considering the interviewees Yiyang Wu was suitably finishing her PhD in Aalto University's Department of Design. She graduated in May 2017. In her dissertation *Bicycle and Plants*³¹ Wu investigates how service design can provide new opportunities for individuals to develop meaningful social relations³². The interview was based on the second case of the dissertation: design interventions of the *Plant Hotel*.

Finally, I contacted Denise Ziegler after encountering her plant artworks in several festivals and gallery exhibitions.

²⁹ Valkonen 2017.

³⁰ Sinne 29.11.–21.12.2014.

³¹ *Bicycles and Plants: Designing for Conviviality and Meaningful Social Relations through Collaborative Services* (2017).

³² Aalto University 2017.

She studied visual art in Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki and Schule für Gestaltung. In her works Zeigler uses sculpture, installations, plants and video. Her dissertation *Features of the Poetic*³³ for Aalto University searches poetic guidelines for artistic practice through Ziegler's personal work.

All the interviews were made in spring 2017 and were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Research themes and topics were chosen prior to the interviews, and given to all the interviewees before the interview.³⁴ All the interviews included general questions on one's artistic practice, and more practical questions on working with living plant material. In addition to these questions, each artist was asked several questions regarding their own art processes, projects mentioned earlier and others, and artworks related to working with living plant material.³⁵

1.5. Living plant art

It is evident that there has been a rising number of living plants used in different contexts in latest contemporary art exhibitions and festivals. Louis Weinberger, who recently exhibited at *documenta 14*, has been working with plants since the beginning of his career. Plants are central to his discourse on the relationship between nature and society. Ruderal plants, grown on wastelands, are initial to his

³³ Features of the Poetic. The Mimetic Method of the Visual Artist (2010).

³⁴ Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2013, 75.

³⁵ See Appendix.

practice and serve as an orientation point for notes, drawings, photographs, texts and big projects in public spaces.³⁶ For the same exhibition, pioneer in environmental art, Agnes Denes, was invited to create a large-scale environmental installation *The Living Pyramid* (2015/2017). The pyramid was a social structure where its planted materials conveyed ideas of evolution and regeneration. In the beginning of June 2017, audience members were invited to a public planting of the installation, thus the work also cultivated a micro-society of people responsible for its planting and ongoing care.³⁷ The internet is full of similar examples and one can easily find more plant-based art projects on Tumblr hosted sites such as *Exotic Plants in Contemporary Art* and *Plants in Contemporary Art*³⁸. Unfortunately these sites rarely tell much about the artist, venue, or the idea.

In her review article *A Plant as Familiar* animator Faye Kahn tries to formulate a reason for the popularity of a living houseplant used in several art pieces currently around the world. Houseplants normally function as an interior decoration to soften the transition from nature to domestic space. They freshen the air, appeal to one's aesthetic senses and remind one of the outside. This relationship to interior decoration has been recognised by many artists. Additionally, the ikebana principle emphasises the link between indoors and outdoors suggesting the whole of nature. This approach addresses the current cultural awareness of environmental

³⁶ Trevor 2017; Weinberger 2017.

³⁷ Hopkins 2017; Denes 2015.

³⁸ Exotic Plants in Contemporary Art [2016]; Plants in Contemporary Art [2016].

issues, in which plants are used to spotlight socio-political perspectives. As a reminder of the natural world, plants also have the ability to represent tropical and indigenous cultures that have more intimate relationships with nature.³⁹ As I already mentioned, the houseplant has more complex implications than just a symbol of nature: it has transitioned into a subject with a capability of stand in for a human being. Without an emotive face, in art houseplant is used as a unique stand-in for a person. As innocent, attractive and sympathetic individuals, houseplants are not fostering any theatrics nor do they rely on sonic communication like animals do. As a result, art installations including plants can even alienate the viewer as though she would walk into a room of emotionless people.⁴⁰

In an interesting blog post by Walker Art Center's photographer Gene Pittman, he discusses this anthropomorphic phenomenon in archival photos from the centre before 1971. Back then plants were a common sight in museums and galleries where they performed a decorative role. According to Pittman, potted plants were always present and seemed to "act as the stand-ins for patrons, sometimes aloof and in the background or congregating around the radiator as if in discussion. And then there are those that are really into the work, standing in front of a sculpture's light, their shadows enveloping the work"⁴¹. Similar effect can be found in another Tumbler hosted blog

³⁹ Kahn 2013.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Pittman 2010; Kahn 2013.

Mise en Green compiled by curator and exhibition producer Arden Sherman. The blog slowly documents the plant's evolution from decorative element to a chosen member of an art piece.⁴² This phenomenon is not limited only to museums and galleries in Northern America, and similar archival exhibition photos can be found, for example, from Ateneum Art Museum's archives and collections in Helsinki.

Due to multiple reasons usually associated to conservation and public-related museum practices, plants now only appear in galleries if they are part of an artwork. Even though this anthropomorphisation is largely unrecognised by the public, artists use it in all sort of art forms from installations to performances and sculptures. Faye Kahn's *House Plants in Contemporary Art*⁴³ site present many examples of contemporary artworks including living plants. However, art critic Ben Valentine argues that the biggest failure in (ecological and environmental) art is that it is typically limited to aesthetic interventions with very little understanding of the materials they are using. If art is to be actually relevant to the environment, it needs to come out from the art (historical) context. For example, artist Agnes Denes' tree-planting projects are protected for hundreds of years, and will eventually become old forests.⁴⁴ Although plants' qualities as aesthetically and emotionally ambiguous living subjects make them versatile objects to use, instead of being interested in mere representations and setting up

⁴² Sherman 2017; Kahn 2013.

⁴³ Kahn 2017.

⁴⁴ Valentine 2017.

sites for (art)objects representing their objective values, this thesis aims to form a new kind of language to grasp the materiality in the interviewed artists' processes and to provide "spaces for curatorial action in which unusual encounters and discourses become possible"⁴⁵. To bare the current environmental issues is to bring the art to life for other people to see and experience. This work requires creativity, and forward and abstract thinking, and for all this to matter, it needs to elicit action.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Sternfeld 2010.

⁴⁶ Valentine 2017.

2. On art

2.1. Feminist knowing and research

I am situating this contemporary art and curatorial study in feminist studies. According to feminist research all information is produced in social and cultural relations, where situating the nature of knowledge, the production of knowledge, and the producer of knowledge are important. Knowledge and knowing are both bound to time, place and the person, and thus contextual and material. Instead of objective, producing knowledge and science is personal and social. Personal interests affect these common practices in which people are taking part.⁴⁷ Situating requires an articulation of one's starting points, backgrounds, methods and aims, including the social, ecological, political and/or economical preconditions⁴⁸.

According to philosopher Julia Kristeva, one may discover alternative, mobile and transformative knowledge through the arts⁴⁹. Art offers a way to map the complex relations between nature and culture, body and language and knowledge. If one agrees to see artistic and/or curatorial practice as a mode of enquiry and knowledge production, one also challenges the primacy of the science in the knowledge

⁴⁷ Keller 1988, 11, 21–23, 142.

⁴⁸ Elfving 2017a, 16; Haraway 1988.

⁴⁹ Barrett & Bolt 2013, xi–xii. See also Julia Kristeva's "Giotto's joy" in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980).

economy⁵⁰. Kristeva emphasises that the “universal objective truth” cannot hold if we do not take into account subjective processes: embodied experience and interaction between the body and non-human (matter). Art operates in interaction with objects, in the impulse to handle them and to think and feel through their handling. By examining material and experiential dimensions of the interviewed artists’ creative production, my aim is to enter the stage where meanings behind the codes of these visual and non-verbal systems may be accessed.⁵¹ I am situating this research in feminist studies because it produces emancipatory politics and a new kind of vision of subjectivity. It aims to question the power related to production, reception and evaluation of knowledge⁵².

2.2. Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants—curating the booklet

In this thesis I write about curating in the way how curating in the way how Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff describe it in the compilation *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating*: I am interested in the knowledge curating builds and the knowledges it produces⁵³. I see my curatorial process for the booklet as an event of knowledge, as a chance to produce a new narrative or an utterance on the topic⁵⁴. Through this

⁵⁰ Liljeström 2004, 9–13.

⁵¹ Kristeva 1984; Barrett 2013, 63–64.

⁵² Liljeström 2004, 9–13.

⁵³ Martinon & Rogoff 2013, viii.

⁵⁴ Martinon & Rogoff 2013, viii–x.

two-piece research I am advocating another way of thinking, and sensing the world.

If one considers curator’s work as mediating and dialogic, and producing new knowledge, the sensibility for different contexts is preconditional. Situating my work and knowledge to feminist contemporary art studies is important for taking the responsibility for the actions and dialogue the thesis creates. Situating also challenges the supposition of the neutrality of knowledge and practices. Like Donna Haraway describes it:

“It matters which ideas we think other ideas with. It matters what matters we use to think other matters with. It matters what stories we tell other stories with. It matters what know knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”⁵⁵

Critical situating is important, because one always chooses to “nourish some worlds and not others”⁵⁶. During this thesis process I have also had to accept that curator’s work is not about controlling everything, even though this does not really release me from any responsibilities, and makes the work even harder. Making a study with plants, beings and people, looking back and forth at each other with their “sticky and muddled histories”, I appreciate the yet unknown and complexity of the process.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Haraway 2016, 12.

⁵⁶ Haraway 2008, 88.

⁵⁷ Haraway 2008, 42.

In this study I am using Donna Haraway's metaphor of *diffraction* for producing another kind of critical consciousness. In physics, when light passes through a prism, the direction of the light rays change. They are diffracted to another location, to another angle. As a researcher I am following the diffracted light "behind the corner" where weird and strange combinations of things appear and generate new and surprising meanings, not just reflections and representations.⁵⁸ Reading the interview data diffractively means to search for differences, meanings and contexts that matter and make a difference. It involves building new insights and inventive provocations⁵⁹.

The booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants* comprises of artists' interview quotations accompanied with plant illustrations. I consider the curatorial booklet as a medium of communication—such as an exhibition. The booklet as a form of knowledge becomes effective when its principles are made visible by reading the interview data diffractively.⁶⁰ It also frames the discourse of working with plants. Additionally, in my curatorial practice I want to make room for singular interpretations to surface. Like curator Mélanie Bouteloup, I believe that art has a way to reflect the key issues of our time, and it is necessary to defend a conception of art as a work in process rather than a

⁵⁸ Haraway 2000, 101–108; Rojola 2016, 131–132.

⁵⁹ Haraway 2000, 101–108; Rojola 2016, 131–132; Barad 2012, 49–50; Barad 2003, 803.

⁶⁰ Déotte 2013, 169.

finished object. In this processual contact zone⁶¹ it is possible to provoke situations and encounters between different and oppositional voices⁶².

The booklet is divided into three parts: *art, materiality* and *plants*, based on the three apparent themes that rose from the interview data. The interviewees' quotations chosen for the booklet may evoke feelings of confusion, hilarity, awareness, concern and sometimes even disbelief. It is clear that not all the artists talk or think about plants in the same way. Nevertheless, they all share the same concerns for the environment and the current challenges our society has to face these days. In this academic part of the thesis I have used some of the booklet's quotations to illustrate the artists' attitudes and thoughts on working with living plants. In the booklet the quotations have been intentionally left anonymous to highlight the artists' ideas instead of the artists themselves. I conducted most of the interviews in Finnish and then translated the quotations into English. To emphasise the importance of both *what* the interviewees said and *how* they said it, I decided to include both languages into the booklet.

Even though during the interviews we discussed several existing projects realised by the artists themselves, I chose not to include any photos of the artworks nor the

⁶¹ For political theorist Chantal Mouffe one of the prerequisites for the construction and maintenance of an emancipated society lies in the faculty to embrace differences, contradictions, and conflicts. Mouffe 1993.

⁶² Bouteloup 2016, 120.

exhibitions into the booklet to illustrate the curatorial process. These pictures would not have been directly related to this particular study, and would have appeared merely as representations. I am interested in the descriptions of the artistic processes, artists' ideas, and how they talk about their work, and their relationships to plants. For some artists who are used to express themselves non-verbally, it was quite difficult to verbalise one's practice and thoughts through an interview. As an interviewer, I also found it difficult to come up with the right questions to address the indeterminate intuitive process of artistic production. I wanted to keep the booklet's focus on the artists' practice: their thoughts on art, materiality and plants. As an ex-designer drawing the illustrations and laying out the booklet myself felt like a natural thing to do, to keep the artists' projects separate and not to emphasise anyone's artwork over others—to concentrate and focus on the importance of plants.

The illustrations are made in an old taxonomic style in honour of two major natural scientists Charles Darwin and Carl von Linné. Lately there has been a small boom of exhibitions rooted in botany. One of the recent ones, *Systema Naturae*⁶³ curated by Mirja Majeovski, borrows its name from Carl von Linné's book published in 1735. Linné's work played a pivotal role in the establishment of universally accepted conventions for naming organisms: taxonomy. In Linné's time European colonial empire expanded quickly and new species were found frequently. It was important for the elite

⁶³ Kunsthall Stavanger 31.8.–15.10.2017.

scientific community to establish a system that accurately described and consistently catalogued all the plants in the world. To this day, this nominalist⁶⁴ way of interpreting has been the prevalent method of thinking about plants in the West. The taxonomic method aims to capture the essence of the plant by assigning it to an exact place according to its genus, tribe, and so on, but at the same time the system swallows the plant's singularity and uniqueness. According to Michael Marder, the detailed classifications aim to reduce, minimise, and erase "the real and ideal barriers humans have erected between themselves and plants"⁶⁵. Nevertheless, like *Systema Naturae* exhibition, I chose to use this style to bring forth a question whether one could see the world differently if there was another way of organising and naming. I am fully aware of the representational aspect of the illustrations, and through the booklet layout my aim is to take into consideration every plant's uniqueness, to dispel the boundaries of representationalism, and to refer to post-humanism and new materialism where processes of becoming and agency are important. The plants chosen for the illustrations are the same ones discussed in the interviews, the same ones artists used in their artworks and projects, and the same ones they thought their thoughts with. Some of the plants are the same ones I have spent my time thinking with, contemplating and processing on the research topic.

⁶⁴ A philosophical view which denies the existence of universals and abstract objects, but affirms the existence of general or abstract terms and predicates.

⁶⁵ Marder 2013, 5.

The curatorial booklet as a form shares a similar history to artists' books. According to theorist and book artist Johanna Drucker the development of artists' books is particularly marked after 1945 when they started to have their own practitioners, theorists, critics, innovators and visionaries. Artists' books are created at the intersection of number of different disciplines, fields and ideas, and are commonly created as an original work of art, rather than reproduction of a pre-existing work. The books are usually self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form, even though they are not entirely about that form or its conventions.⁶⁶ Usually the conventions of the distinction between image and texts alters. Unlike in artists' books, I'm not interested in exploring the book as an innovative form of an artistic concept⁶⁷, but rather curious about the knowledge it produces. To me, this booklet works as a form to interrogate and create new meanings. Usually artists' books tend to bend and stretch all the rules and conventions of a book, but are, for the same reason, books in order to succeed. The use of the small format and inexpensive productions methods bespeaks the transformation of print technology and the conceptual sensibility. Additionally, books as a form are low maintenance, long-lived, free floating objects with the capacity to convey information freely. They serve as a vehicle to communicate beyond the limits of individual's life or contacts. In this way one can argue that books and independent publishing are closely linked to activist art.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Drucker 1995, 1-2.

⁶⁷ Drucker 1995, 3-4.

⁶⁸ Drucker 1995, 4-5, 7, 9-10.

Art appreciation usually follows a path determined by an evaluation of the quality of the art through declarative statements. Artist and academic Luis Camnitzer argues that to focus on the question of 'need' instead of 'quality' helps to identify the problems being addressed, and the conditions that generated the existence of the work in general. To explore the need of a particular work of art—in this case a booklet—one identifies what prompted the artist/curator to consider it necessary to make the work. The audience member or a reader is thus lead to speculate about all other possibilities involved in the process of creation. In this way, to explore the work one goes *around* it, not *through* it, and has a collegial approximation to the artist/curator.⁶⁹ Since working with plants is a rather new subject in arts and curatorial studies, I would like to argue that this two-piece research is needed to broaden the perception of human and non-human collaboration.

2.3. Arts and curatorial

The interviewed artists aim to contribute to thinking and understanding of the world through their artistic practices. This opens academia's boundaries to new forms of thinking and understanding. Neither the artists nor do I in my curatorial practice seek to make the knowledge explicit, but rather provide specific articulations and invite "unfinished thinking". Methodologically creative processes form

⁶⁹ Camnitzer 2016, 115-116.

pathways through which new insights, understanding and sometimes products come into being. One of the outcomes of my curatorial research is the booklet, which means that my curatorial practice has been as paramount as the subject matter, the method, the context and the outcome of the research. Thus, the practice has not been only the result but also a methodological vehicle, and the research unfolds in and through the act of creating.⁷⁰ Knowledge and experiences are constituted through practice, actions and interactions. The booklet as a material outcome of the process invites one to unfinished thinking and prompts one toward a critical perspective on what there actually is.⁷¹ Through curatorial production I am seeking to contribute not just to the curatorial or artistic universe, but also to what one ‘knows’ and ‘understands’.

“I have a feeling that at the moment art is not filling its whole potentiality.”⁷²

“Art could also actively question its own place. Art should have the courage to be difficult and open, useless and time consuming.”⁷³

I would argue that material knowledge is an indispensable component in the practice of artists and curators. When generating new or contemporary art, the research is

⁷⁰ Borgdoff 2012, 146–147.

⁷¹ Borgdoff 2012, 148, 160–161.

⁷² Kausalainen 2017.

⁷³ Ibid.

conducted in and through the making of art. The interview with Essi Kausalainen was conducted at her studio and home, surrounded by Swiss cheese plants and other plant friends. This is where Kausalainen expressed her concerns about the nature of art these days. According to her art should more actively examine its own place, and to have the courage to be even more difficult and time consuming. Art is not filling its whole potentiality. Kausalainen described that the feeling is quite bad when one enters an exhibition space that looks like a sleek design boutique filled with design-like objects.⁷⁴ She emphasised that art is above all about the ideas, and art should appreciate and trust itself without underestimating its audience.

“It’s clearly visible in the art world, where the dialogue is sought from another discipline.”⁷⁵

Both Essi Kausalainen and photographer Maija Savolainen indicated that to them contemporary art was sometimes not enough, so they sought a dialogue with another discipline, in their case biology. Having a background also in natural sciences, Savolainen’s artistic practice sometimes uses methods and techniques with origins in scientific research, such as empirical methods of observation, theory and hypothesis formation, prediction and testing. In her solo exhibition *The Matter of Light and Fuchsia* gotenborg

⁷⁴ Kausalainen 2017.

⁷⁵ Savolainen 2017.

Savolainen conducted a plant growth experiment showing the effects of different wavebands of light on the development of the Fuchsia seedlings. Savolainen carried out a similar experiment in the exhibition *Presenceness*⁷⁶ in May 2017 where light was manifested in the shape and form of pea sprouts (*Pisum sativum*)⁷⁷. Having a meaningful dialogue with researchers coming from a different disciplines was important for both Savolainen and Kausalainen. Kausalainen's collaborations with a plant biologist from the University of Helsinki started in 2013, when she was finding her practice again as an artist. She had already been acquainted with plants but needed a translator, someone with a different language and approach, and who could help her to articulate her ideas⁷⁸.

Bringing together expertise from natural sciences and arts can lead to inspiring findings and insights. According to Henk Borgdoff multidisciplinary collaborations between artists and scientists can roughly take two forms: either scientific research helps or illuminates the art, or the art helps or illuminates the current events of science. For example in BioArt one uses biotechnological procedures leaning heavily on scientific research, while pointing a critical light on the ethical and social implications of science.⁷⁹ Cynically Borgdoff also argues that multidisciplinary projects must be understood as collaborations between different disciplines

⁷⁶ Titanik 21.4.-14.5.2017.

⁷⁷ Titanik 2017.

⁷⁸ Kausalainen 2016; 2017.

⁷⁹ Borgdoff 2012, 156-158.

around a particular topic, but the theoretical premises and working methods of these two disciplines still remain intact⁸⁰. Both Savolainen and Kausalainen had cooperated with plant biologists from the University of Helsinki and benefited a lot from their collaborations. Besides gaining new knowledge and ways to express one's thoughts, for example Kausalainen's practice had changed from previously working alone now collaborating with different groups of people. In the beginning of May I took part in an unofficial plant seminar *Kasvien kanssa* [Together with Plants]⁸¹ together with artists and biologist interested in this interdisciplinary topic. From what I heard, the collaboration with artists also allowed the biologists to step outside from the rigorous boundaries defining natural sciences, and to examine the world from another angle. However, I believe that both sides continued working according to their discipline, but the possibility to share thoughts and to have a dialogue was important to all.

“As an artist I have the freedom of fabling and imagining things.”⁸²

“It's a locution. Far from something written, verbal or textual perception.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Borgdoff 2012, 159.

⁸¹ *Kasvien kanssa*. Seminaari toimimisesta kasvien kanssa. [Together with Plants. A seminar on working with plants]. 3.5.2017. Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.

⁸² Kausalainen 202017.

⁸³ Saarinen 2017.

Even though gaining new insights from different disciplines was pivotal to both Kausalainen's and Savolainen's practice, I assume that the artists felt most at home in their own field. Having read several philosophical and theoretical books related to her field of interest, Kausalainen did not have a problem expressing her thoughts verbally. She emphasised the privileged position of an artist to have the freedom of fabling and imagining things, compared to natural scientists rigidly tied to their discipline's vocabulary, for example. Sculptor Raimo Saarinen, however, had a different approach in his practice. To him making art was a locution, a way of expressing his thoughts and concerns without using written, verbal or textual perception. During our interview made at Musiikkitalo's café, Saarinen described his process of working as a subconscious action. Lately, he has been interested in the way people take advantage of nature, and felt an urgent need to comment or process these issues.⁸⁴ Artistic and curatorial research is mainly discovery-led. All the interviewed artists took a search on the basis of their intuition, guesses and hunches, and were in terms of the possible stumbles or surprising questions arising along the way. Additionally, these practices are always situated and embedded. Through performances, installations, sculptures, photographs, and happenings the artists are trying to express something with a language which can be understood as a "verbalisation" of the artistic outcome. My curatorial thoughts and utterances "assemble themselves" around the quotations and illustrations, and the booklet begins to

⁸⁴ Saarinen 2017.

speak.⁸⁵ I believe that the artists and I share the same aim to set one's thinking into motion, and to invite to unfinished reflection, and perhaps a dialogue. To me, it is important to realise that one does not yet know what one does not know. Art invites one to "linger at the frontier of what there is, and it gives one an outlook on what might be"⁸⁶.

"The aim is to make people think, to provoke questions, reflections and debate."⁸⁷

"Too often we accept things as they are. Wherever I go, I see that things could be different. What would happen if that would be like this instead?"⁸⁸

Service designer Yiyang Wu came from a bit different background than the other interviewees. However, her design intervention of the Plant Hotel was heavily inspired by participatory art in relational settings. As a curator, I also feel that my design background has above all benefited my practice, so in this case I did not see the need to distinguish art and design. Wu's practice aims to create meanings for new social relations, and to encourage people to work as capable agents, as contributors, rather than mere customers waiting to be served. Through Plant Hotel Wu tried to make people think, provoke questions, reflections and debate, all aims that do not really differ from the other interviewees'

⁸⁵ Borgdoff 2012, 162-165, 168.

⁸⁶ Borgdoff 2012, 173.

⁸⁷ Wu 2017.

⁸⁸ Ziegler 2017.

aspirations. During my interview with artist Denise Ziegler held at the Musiikkitalo's cafe, she also stressed that too often people accept things as they are, and felt the urgency to comment and act differently in these everyday situations.⁸⁹ Both artists were curious to change the current state of affairs, and interested in the *what if*.

I have felt that in the beginning of the 21st century, contemporary art has remained rather distant with the growing fascination of the future. One can even argue that art has been obsessed with, and oriented towards, the past. Archiving, commemoration, memory, reconstruction and documentation are few of the popular themes and methods used lately in the contemporary art world. Theorist and curator Dieter Roelstraete describes this trend as “the historiographic turn”⁹⁰. But looking back in history can overshadow the view of both the present and the future. It becomes more difficult to be open to the creative and critical potential for the unknown and the unexpected. But how can one cherish openness and look to the future when the present is so uncertain and unstable in these times of political, economical and environmental crisis?⁹¹

⁸⁹ Wu 2017; Ziegler 2017.

⁹⁰ Roelstraete 2009.

⁹¹ Folkerts et al. 2015, 9, 14, 16.

“It is often said that artists are useless, but that's the exact reason why they are needed! Someone, who is not contributing to the economical growth and to the ratrace. Someone, who steps back and sees what's actually happening.”⁹²

“Every day the surrounding culture and context make me more convinced about the meaningfulness of the autonomy of arts. In a certain sense art should remain as an island of futility. It cannot be deployed by any ethos or political stance. It is a place or an area outside rationality, where one can address questions outside the analytic scientific philosophical, linguistic or reflective approaches—there must be other tools than these.”⁹³

I would like to think of the future, and the opinions and proposals stated in this two-piece thesis, as a model for new contemporary power structures, maybe even global shifts and changing relations. Ziegler's and Kausalainen's artistic practices are both centred around poetic and rather minimal gestures but their opinions are strong and bearing. They both emphasise the autonomy of arts and believe that art has a way to mirror, to reveal, and to process the pressing issues of our time. Curator and researcher Simon Sheikh proposes that even though it feels quite tempting to get off this carousel, and not care anymore, one should actually expand the notion of care⁹⁴. The love of art does not

⁹² Ziegler 2017.

⁹³ Kausalainen 2017.

⁹⁴ The word 'curate' comes from the Latin *curare*, 'to take care of'. Curator is a caretaker of objects, a maker or a public programmer, a custodian of history, an archivist of materials, an a handler of precarious objects. She takes care of the past, and deals with understanding and preservation of it.

have to lead to a love of the art world, perhaps it would be more challenging to think about art and the world. He also suggests that if art history is dedicated to the past, maybe curatorial⁹⁵ and arts could orient toward the future.⁹⁶ All the artists recognised that we are witnessing the disappearance of an old world order, but in a way that the new has not yet emerged, or it might not be capable to emerge due to the conditions of the existing order. This time of uncertainty and unpredictability, a period of transition and holding a position, was something the artists were keen to comment on. Sociologist Zygmund Bauman suggests that actually we are living in times of an *interregnum*⁹⁷. There are three areas that one should concentrate on at this historical moment: “1) institutional disparity: inability of current political institutions to act on a global scale, 2) future of the migrants: inevitable movements of people through globalisation, and 3) endurability of the planet: growing gap between rich and poor, and the crises of climate change on the planet”⁹⁸. The last one is particularly my biggest interest.

⁹⁵ According to Martinon and Rogoff if ‘curating’ has to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display, ‘curatorial’ explores “all that takes place on the stage set-up”. Curator views this as an event of knowledge. The distinction between ‘curating’ and ‘the curatorial’ means to “emphasise a shift from the staging event to the actual event itself: its enactment, dramatisation and performance.” Martinon & Rogoff 2013, ix.

⁹⁶ Sheikh 2016, 154, 158.

⁹⁷ Bauman 2012, 49–56.

⁹⁸ Bauman 2012, 51; Sheik 2016, 158–159.

“How do you get people to participate, this is my motivation”⁹⁹

“How do you share the common responsibility? How do you activate it?”¹⁰⁰

So, “how does one make people care? [And], how does one activate people to share the common responsibility?”¹⁰¹ asked Wu when when we discussed what motivates her the most. None of the artist claimed that their major agenda was to change the world to a better place, if that is even possible. Nor did they naively think that as “outsiders” only they can truly see what is happening. However, their aim is to activate people, to nurture the moment for something to click in a person’s head. As Zeigler put it: “one thinks for a second in a different way”¹⁰². As for the common responsibility, I would like to refer to an insightful article by visual artist and writer Hito Steyerl, where she talks about the freedom people have today through George Michael’s famous hit *Freedom ’90*. In Michael’s song freedom is described as not some liberal nirvana of opportunity (unlike in other freedom songs written in that period) but as a negative freedom “[...] it looks like the road to heaven / but it feels like the road to hell”¹⁰³. Negative freedoms are characterised by absence and the lack of property and equality in exchange. Classically,

⁹⁹ Wu 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ziegler 2017.

¹⁰³ E.g. Azlyrics 2017.

liberal freedoms are defined by the ability to do, say, or believe something. However, culturally specific, Western positive freedoms, such as the freedom of speech, the pursuit of happiness and opportunity, and the freedom to worship¹⁰⁴, apply only to specifically demarcated groups depending on one's economical and political situation. Liberal ideas of freedom—the freedom of corporations without any form of control and the freedom to endlessly pursue one's own interest at the expense of everyone else's—have become the only universal freedoms effective today. Steyerl argues that these freedoms from social bounds, from solidarity, employment of labour, culture and education, or anything public, lead us to the contemporary state of freedom: the new freedom from everything.¹⁰⁵

In the world of precarious workers, traditional institutions can offer only negative freedoms: the freedom from everything and the freedom to be outlaws. In these conditions of complete freedom one is free from attachment, subjectivity, loyalty and social bonds. However, these negative freedoms also open up the possibility to explore new forms on relationships between people, and perhaps other beings.¹⁰⁶ The freedom from everything creates a necessity to change. When one accepts that there is no way back to the positive freedom of glorification of self-entrepreneurship and delusion of opportunity, does the new freedom open up:

¹⁰⁴ Do doubt many of these freedoms are also claimed but the non-Western people.

¹⁰⁵ Steyerl 2015, 111–112.

¹⁰⁶ Steyerl 2015, 112–113.

“Freedom! (I won't let you down) / Freedom! (I will not give you up) / Freedom! (Have some faith in the sound) / You've gotta give for what you take (It's the one good thing that I've got)”¹⁰⁷. As I understand it, the new freedom is taking responsibility of one's actions, being accountable not only to your closest ones but the whole environment, the whole planet, because “you've got to give for what you take”.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ E.g. Azlyrics 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Steyerl 2015, 115–116, 118.

3. On materiality

3.1. (New) materialism

One can argue that there is not only a one single way of interpreting an artwork but artworks can have different interpretations depending on the viewer's perspective and her previous knowledge and experiences. Representation analysis has become a major art historical method for interpreting, processing and studying artworks. Critical representation analysis can work as a good method when, for example, trying to reveal invisible gendered power relations. However, the analysis tends to fade the more gentle ways of perception and observing an artwork. Lately the representation analysis, which is part of the post-structuralist discourse, has been criticised heavily. Mainly the critique focuses on how the world is understood thoroughly discursive and produced by representations. In the post-structuralist discourse person can only enter the world through representations, and there is no reality outside the representations to which they refer to. This is a result of the linguistic turn¹⁰⁹ in the 1960s. Researcher have started wondering could there be something else outside the signals and representations—for example materiality—

¹⁰⁹ A change in emphasis in the discourse of the humanities and social sciences reflecting a recognition of the importance of language in human meaning-making. It argues that the reality does not exist outside our textual representations of it, and that these representations cannot be separated from the ideological meanings that people bring to them.

whose origins cannot be explained by representations. When one focuses only on the meaning of an artwork the representations tend to be similar, thus continuing the canon of representations.¹¹⁰ Art is reduced to mere objects and processes whose messages, according to Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and many others, are detached from their materiality¹¹¹.

In her dissertation Kontturi claims that none of the images or the representations would exist or be interpretable without the bodily-material processes of making and experiencing art¹¹². How could art and culture methodologically and conceptually grasp “the flow of materiality” that structures one’s every encounter with art? New materialism emphasises that “all entities and processes are composed of—or are reducible to—matter, material forces or physical processes”¹¹³. To open up my understanding of the matter, I would like to use philosopher and feminist Elizabeth Grosz’s quote:

“We¹¹⁴ cannot help but view the world in terms of solids, as things. But we leave behind something untapped of the fluidity of the world, the movements, vibrations, transformations that occur below the threshold of perception and calculation and outside the relevance

¹¹⁰Johansson 2010, 196.

¹¹¹Kontturi 2012b.

¹¹²Kontturi 2012a.

¹¹³Stack 1998, 535.

¹¹⁴Grosz is referring to the Western society, where I am also situating my research.

of our practical concerns. (...) we have other access to this rich profusion of vibrations that underlie the solidity of things.”¹¹⁵

By examining the interview data diffractively, this thesis makes the materiality visible, but also paradoxically verbal. Artists interviewed did not just single-handedly determine the art process, but took part in it together with different materials. If one considers creative practice as a material process, in the between the movement of human and non-human elements, one may conceive subjective processes that can be understood in relation to the agency of materiality itself.¹¹⁶ By acknowledging the agential matter, I am also questioning the anthropocentric¹¹⁷ narrative.

There is nothing new in emphasising materiality per se. Already the ancient philosophers believed that the world is constructed of atoms. As a science materiality has its origins in the development of natural sciences in 17th century. It faced a crisis in the 18th century when different forms of idealisms emphasising subjective thinking started to appear alongside the materialist perception. As a counter reaction Marxist materialism started to take form in the late 19th century with a clear political agenda. Material culture fostered by the Russian avant-garde was clearly centred on

¹¹⁵Grosz 2005, 136.

¹¹⁶Barrett 2013, 72; Kristeva 1984; Bolt 2013, 2.

¹¹⁷Positing humans as makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavours.

revolution and the reordering of society. The act with the material meant to investigate the societal power relations.¹¹⁸

One can argue that the current debate around materials and materiality started from the digital revolution, and philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's and curator Thierry Chaput's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou in 1985 accompanied by a publication on the exhibition¹¹⁹. Investigating the concepts of *postmodernity*, *modernity*, *materialisation*, and *dematerialisation*, Lyotard wanted to demonstrate the emergence of a new materiality due to the advancements in telecommunication technology. The exhibition proposed a new sensibility of material being.¹²⁰ In 1980s Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari proposed that matter is characterised by motion, flux and variation, and one can only follow the flow of matter. Similarly, Jane Bennet and Karen Barad understand matter as a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations rather than a property of things. According to Elizabeth Grosz materials are always in the state of becoming, entangled in vibrant webs of relations with their own ecologies and politics.¹²¹

The term *new materialism* was coined by artist and philosopher Manuel DeLanda and philosopher and feminist Rosi Braidotti in the second half of the 1990s. New materialism emphasises that the mind is always already

¹¹⁸ Heikkilä 2013; Lange-Berndt 2015, 15–16.

¹¹⁹ Lange-Berndt 2015, 16.

¹²⁰ Lucarelli 2014.

¹²¹ Lange-Berndt 2015, 17; Bennet 2010; Barad 2015; Deleuze & Guattari 2015.

material and how matter is something of the mind—the mind as an idea of the body and the mind having the body as its object.¹²² However, in new materialism materiality is not seen as something that overcomes human, and is not defined negatively in relation to language. It opposes the dualist humanist traditions and understands nature and culture already as *nature-cultures*¹²³. In new materialism material factors are not considered as passive human instruments but active agents that can move as well as act, and shape human relations. In addition to technology gaining an agency, new materialism also studies the agency divided between human and animal, and how connections and distinctions are built between human and non-human. To be complicit with the material means to acknowledge the non-human.¹²⁴

3.2. Matter matters

The interviewed artists had very different approaches to working with living material. Savolainen found it especially problematic to produce objects due to the lack of money and storage spaces, and the idea of excess¹²⁵. Ziegler had lately shifted from working with concrete objects to creating more ephemeral public artworks, sometimes happenings

¹²² Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012, 48.

¹²³ A synthesis of nature and culture that recognises their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed. See e.g. Haraway 2003.

¹²⁴ Saari & Harni 2014, 42–43; Lange-Berndt 2015, 17.

¹²⁵ Savolainen 2017.

and performances¹²⁶. The context of artistic and curatorial research allows me to explore the interaction and dialogue with non-human beings as a material, affective and reflective event¹²⁷. To understand better why matter really matters I am tackling the notion of materialist and post-humanist¹²⁸ performativity with the help of physicist and feminist Karen Barad. Barad criticises the fact that language has become more trustworthy than matter, and why it is so that language and culture are granted their own agency and historicity while matter remain passive and immutable?¹²⁹ To Barad what contestants the power granted to language to determine what is real, is performativity. Her materialist, naturalist and post-humanist elaboration of performativity acknowledges matter as an active participant in the world's becomings.¹³⁰ If one figures matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further materialisations, or limits materiality's domain of the 'social', one does not acknowledge the full capacity of matter. But how does matter make itself felt?

¹²⁶ Ziegler 2017.

¹²⁷ Lindberg 2008, 198.

¹²⁸ 'After humanism' or 'beyond humanism'. The idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended, or eliminated either by technological advances or the evolutionary process; artistic, scientific, or philosophical practice which reflects this belief. See 4.1. *After humanism*.

¹²⁹ Barad 2003, 801, 808.

¹³⁰ Barad 2003, 802–803.

“In a way I don't think about the other materials and techniques that I use in a different way. I always try to work according to the techniques and materials at hand, what conditions and handling they require. Plants are not different or special per se, they are just living material.”¹³¹

Ziegler related to plants as a material in a very concrete and pragmatic way. Even though her practice involved working with all sorts of plants from Christmas cactuses to spider plants, she did not distinguish a difference in working with this living material. Like all materials, they required conditions and handling specific to the material. Around Christmas 2016 Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What they Feel, How they Communicate* was released in Finland and created a small stir among layman readers. When discussed that Christmas trees suffer from thirst and discomfort, miss their companions, and make the houseplants worry¹³², Ziegler did not feel romantic nor bad about her usage of living plants in her works. On the contrary, she emphasised that it is always a matter of choice which materials one regards important, and those trees will have another chance to meet their companions in front of the trash bins after the Christmas celebration is over. However, having a background in sculpting, working and choosing the materials was meaningful to Ziegler.¹³³ In Wu's Plant Hotel project it was important to encourage people to come and work for each other. The plants people brought to

¹³¹ Ziegler 2017.

¹³² Kuusela 2016.

¹³³ Ziegler 2017.

the hotel before leaving abroad worked as a medium for the socially engaged design practice. Nevertheless, it was not Wu's and Yoshizawa's responsibility if the "customer's" plant actually died, as they only provided a framework for the experiment.¹³⁴ Still, according to Wu plants can play a big role among different social groups, and she enjoyed giving attention to the avocado plants she grew at home. Building an attachment to a place through plants create a certain kind of ownership, which makes her invest more into the space.

"My process begins from observing the body and the thoughts arising from it. The idea of a corporeal plant, and plant as a being, has been a key factor. The things it has opened about my own being. The realisation has stretched my own thinking a lot."¹³⁵

Kausalainen's approach to working with plants was very different from others mentioned previously. The realisation of plants as agential materials, and as beings with a body very different from ours, had changed her thinking. As a performance artist Kausalainen does not only present and explore the bodily experiences in the world, but by letting the plants to affect her bodily-material processes and her train of thought, she is interested in the ongoing and continuous motion, change and becoming. To Barad the primary epistemological unit is not an independent object with built-in boundaries and properties, but rather a phenomenon.

¹³⁴ Wu 2017.

¹³⁵ Kausalainen 2017.

Through intra-actions¹³⁶ one can determine the boundaries and properties of the "components" of phenomena. Thus its embodied concepts become meaningful. To elaborate this idea a bit further, Barad is referring to the work of physicist Niels Bohr. For Bohr things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, just as words do not have inherently determinate meanings. Phenomena are produced through intra-actions of multiple apparatus of bodily production. However, rather than static arrangements, apparatuses are dynamic (re)configurations of the world. They are open-ended practices.¹³⁷

"It's an ongoing process. It comes across to people visiting the place consciously or unconsciously. Specifically being in that moment."¹³⁸

"Material also protects the artist. Very quickly she starts concentrating on the process, and doesn't have time to think about how she looks and how this is supposed to go."¹³⁹

To many of the interviewees the actual process of working with plant material was very important. Savolainen's exhibition *Matter of Light and Fuchsia gotenborg* comprised

¹³⁶ This neologism was introduced by Barad. For Barad, phenomena or objects do not precede their interaction, but rather, 'objects' emerge through particular intra-actions. Apparatuses producing phenomena, are not assemblages of humans and non-humans but rather the condition of possibility of 'humans' and 'non-humans', not only as ideational concepts but in their materiality as well.

¹³⁷ Barad 2003, 813–816.

¹³⁸ Savolainen 2017.

¹³⁹ Valkonen 2017b.

of changing photographic compilations and growing plants. The ongoing process came across if people visited the exhibition more than once. Above all, to Savolainen the exhibition emphasised the act of being in the moment, to be complicit with the materials.¹⁴⁰ The interview with artist Ilona Valkonen was conducted over a nice cup of tea also at Musiikkitalo's café. This is where she described her Vieno Motors project and performance in detail, and her approach towards working with plants. The whole process started from another exhibition titled *Yhdeksän elämän museo* [The Museum of Nine Lives] curated by Valkonen herself together with artist Maija Blåfield. For the exhibition the artists were invited to experiment with a technique not familiar to them with a guidance of a mentor. The flower shop-café where the exhibition planning group was meant to meet was suddenly closed, but the promise of the plants' scent lingered in Valkonen's mind. She missed the feeling of being in the olfactory atmosphere. Thus, at the last moment, Valkonen decided to create a flower shop into the exhibition space, and invite artists she admired to work with her collegially on site.¹⁴² Vieno Motors mixed found objects and flowers, and very quickly the visual artist, often not custom to perform in front of an audience, started to concentrate on the process not caring how she might look or is supposed to do. "The material somehow protects the artist"¹⁴², Valkonen describes. To Barad through these specific intra-actions phenomena comes to matter—in both senses of the word.

¹⁴⁰ Savolainen 2017.

¹⁴¹ Valkonen 2017b.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Boundaries are constituted through material-discursive practices, and thus agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world. According to Barad, matter refers to the materiality and materialisation of phenomena, and not to an inherent fixed property of an existing object. Materiality is discursive and discursive practices are material (re)configurations of the world, through which boundaries, properties and meanings are enacted.¹⁴⁴

"I think of us as animals a lot. The animal side of people, which to me means the haptic sensibility and sensuality that our culture doesn't really cultivate. It's rather cut and chopped off."¹⁴⁵

All the interviewed artists described their processes and practices as material and corporeal. Sensing the world through one's body was emphasised especially in performance artist Kausalainen's work. Barad suggests that all bodies, not only human bodies, come to matter through world's intra-activity, its performativity. Bodies are not seen as objects with built-in boundaries and properties, but material-discursive phenomena.¹⁴⁶ In this sense agency can be seen as matter of changes and the possibilities in apparatuses of bodily production. These changes take place in various intra-actions. However, agency is not limited to human intentionality or subjectivity, and it cannot be

¹⁴³ Barad 2003, 817–818.

¹⁴⁴ Barad 2003, 821–822.

¹⁴⁵ Kausalainen 2017.

¹⁴⁶ Barad 2003, 823.

designated as an attribute of *subjects* or *objects*. Barad does not see nature as a passive surface nor an end product of cultural performances. Matter is not a fixed essence, but it is a substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing.¹⁴⁷

This curatorial research has not been only theory based. On the contrary, it is based on the artist interviews, and having a chance to see, experience and even touch some of the artists' projects and artworks discussed. Like Kontturi describing her dissertation process, during the interviews I occasionally came across a situation where the artist could not thoroughly explain how the art process actually went or proceeded¹⁴⁸. Art was seen as an intuitive and creative practice where the artist did not single-handedly determine or control the process, but rather took part in it letting different materials, phenomena, process together. When emphasising the processuality of the artistic practice, I am putting human and non-human actions at the same level, acknowledging them both as active components of the process. But how did the matter make itself present in my curatorial process? When conducting the interviews in various cosy or bleak but yet accessible locations, writing the thesis on my laptop, drawing and colouring the illustration in my sketch book, compiling and laying out the selected quotations, choosing and ordering the right kind of printing papers in my living room filled with houseplants, I noticed the subtle movements

¹⁴⁷ Barad 2003, 827–828.

¹⁴⁸ Kontturi 2012b.

and material effects related to a simple booklet that appear to be stable and straightforward at first glance.

4. On plants

4.1. After humanism

“Where did we ever get the strange idea that nature—as opposed to culture—is ahistorical and timeless? We are far too impressed by our own cleverness and self-consciousness. (...) We need to stop telling ourselves the same old anthropocentric bedtime stories.”¹⁴⁹

While new materialism deserts human and social construction and representations, and focuses more on the material processes, post-humanism questions the whole status of human philosophically, biologically and socially. In this way post humanist research is very close to the new materialistic tradition. However, some of the researchers quoted in my study (e.g. Donna Haraway, Ian Bogost and Bruno Latour) have a problematic relationship to post-humanism, which has been criticised for being too anthropocentric.¹⁵⁰ Post-humanism has its roots in 19th century natural sciences, psychoanalytical and economical-political thinking, but also in 20th century continental philosophy, 1940s cybernetics, and in 1970s ecological awakening. Post-humanism came as a reaction towards genetic manipulation, the sixth ongoing global extinction wave and virtual capitalism. It suggests entirely to abandon

¹⁴⁹ Shaviro 1997.

¹⁵⁰ See e.g. Bogost 2012, 7–8.

the worldview connected to human development and the idea of a human being superior towards other beings, things and forces. Post-humanism searches for alternatives, non-essential and non-hierarchical ways to understand the qualities and properties of different beings and things and their reciprocal relations. As a starting point, humans are not determined in opposition to non-humans and they are not superior to non-human with their intellectual, physical, psychological and social abilities. Humans have developed together with different material and technological forms, and radically, non-humans have made humans in what they are today: only replaceable, increasable and changeable beings.¹⁵²

In this thesis I am interested in the second movement¹⁵³ in post-humanism concerning organic, animal and non-human *nature*. Post-humanism abandons the dualist conceptions of nature and culture, and rather refers to nature-cultures where natural and cultural things and beings are mixed or intertwined together.¹⁵⁴ Nature is seen as material and processual phenomena and not just a space for non-human representations and ideological questions¹⁵⁵. However, post-humanism does not try to grant animals and non-human beings the position of privileged subject,

¹⁵¹ Lummaa & Rojola 2016a., 7–8.

¹⁵² Lummaa & Rojola 2016b., 14.

¹⁵³ The first movement, transhumanism, is interested in non-organic machines and technology.

¹⁵⁴ See e.g. Haraway 2008; Latour 2004.

¹⁵⁵ Lummaa & Rojola 2016b., 19, 22.

because it only renews the division between the human and the non-human. One must understand human as one creature among others in the multiform life of the planet.¹⁵⁶

4.2. Becoming an object, encountering a plant

Even though in this thesis I have been talking against the objectification of beings in the sense of instrumentalising them, here I wish to talk about object-oriented ontology and plant-thinking as a method for finding new way to work with plants. According to post-humanist researcher Karoliina Lummaa the paradox of subjectivity and objectivity is the key to tackle the ecological questions in a philosophical and practical way. The human objectivity, the conceptual self-objectification¹⁵⁷, is necessary from the ecological point of view. Object-oriented ontology considers man-made constructions and items, as well as beings and materials in the nature (e.g. fungi, plants and weather) as objects, and the questions related to their existence, relationships and agencies are pivotal to this school of thought. To understand oneself as an object among other objects, hopefully affects the human decision and policy making in the way that one does not necessarily seek to benefit only from the human point of view.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Lummaa & Rojola 2016b., 27–29.

¹⁵⁷ Not in the sense of instrumentalising humans nor avoiding the question related to human actions, power or responsibilities.

¹⁵⁸ Lummaa 2016, 266–268.

“Nobody gets worried when a plant withers away or one forgets to water it. Unlike animals, one doesn’t pay so much attention to plants. And that’s precisely why I think they tell more about us, what kind of people we are.”¹⁵⁹

To understand oneself as an object is easier said than done. As Ziegler describes it, it is more effortless and somewhat more natural to humans to worry about an animal than a plant. But to Ziegler, this attitude and relation towards plants tells even more about humans and the kind of people we are. Ziegler uses the houseplants’ (symbolic) ability to transition into a subject with a capability to stand in for human beings in her practice a lot¹⁶⁰, but rarely her artworks provoke situations where people would put themselves on the same line as non-human beings. She is more interested in the way people perceive the world. According to eco-semiotician Riin Magnus every living organism is simultaneously a subject and an object: beings move and observe other things, and recognise them as useful and meaningful. Simultaneously beings respond to things in a meaningful way. It is crucial to send and receive messages, and to internalise the possibility of one’s actions, and to understand the possibility of being the target of someone else’s actions (survival of predation, nutrition, reproduction).¹⁶¹ However, as time has passed, partly due to technology, human communication has narrowed down to only one species¹⁶².

¹⁵⁹ Ziegler 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Kahn 2013.

¹⁶¹ Magnus 2012, 158–160; Lummaa 2016, 268.

¹⁶² This is called anthropological singularity.

Prisoned by the human language, humans have lost their communication link to the non-human world. But shutting themselves away from the cycle of meaningful relations with other beings just emphasises the human responsibility to nature.¹⁶³ The dualistic division of meaningless nature and human reality built with cultural and social meanings has blurred the awareness of meanings and agencies in one’s relationship with the nature¹⁶⁴. When one considers human language as the basis of (human) understanding, and if perceptiveness, thinking, ways of experiencing, and the means of communication are all dependent on the language, mutual understanding with other beings and species become impossible¹⁶⁵.

“At the same time plants are alive and a commodity. They are products with economical value but also alive and in need of constant engagement.”¹⁶⁶

Wu’s description of one’s relation to plants is quite common. One sees this dual division in everyday life where plants, like other commodities, are determined according to seasonal interior decoration trends, but also treated as the subject of interest of popular books on plant-intelligence and increasing awareness. But, if object-oriented ontology emphasises the independence of the object, the object cannot be defined by the observant nor the knowledgeable

¹⁶³ Magnus 2012, 162; Lummaa 2016, 268–269.

¹⁶⁴ Latour 2004, 9–41; Lummaa 2016, 269.

¹⁶⁵ Bogost 2012, 4–5; Lummaa 2016, 270.

¹⁶⁶ Wu 2017.

subject.¹⁶⁷ Or to put it in new materialist terms, things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and rather than things, phenomena are produced in intra-actions of multiple apparatus of bodily production¹⁶⁸. There is nothing new in examining life as objects and interactions between objects in natural sciences, so object-orientation must be understood most of all as an ontology and as a form of human self-understanding. It is important that humans start to acknowledge themselves as objects among other objects coexisting on the planet. But how can this be actually realised?

“What is my justification for doing this, and how ethical is it? Can I continue to work like this, is it really healthy for me if I start blaming myself?”¹⁶⁹

When we talked about the ethical treatment of plants as living materials for sculptural artworks, Saarinen did raise up the question of justification. He did think about the conditions and handling of the plants, but was at the same time concerned about his own well-being. How mentally healthy could it be for him to start blaming himself over the use of plants in his art? Saarinen respected plants as materials and natural resources, and treated them differently than he would treat other precious sculptural materials. But, his worries about his own well-being demonstrate exactly the difficulty of the conceptual self-objectification.

¹⁶⁷ Bryant 2011, 14–27.

¹⁶⁸ See e.g. Bogost 2012, Barad 2012, Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012b.

¹⁶⁹ Saarinen 2017.

To tackle this question, writer and a member of the object-oriented philosophy movement Timothy Morton suggests the idea of *hyper-objects*. They are objects and materials born from human action lasting longer than a single human life. Hyper-objects, for example climate change, change the environment and beings, and affect the human experience of our surroundings. Around these hyper-objects subjects begin to transfer into objects, or become more aware of themselves as objects.¹⁷⁰ When one understands herself as an object, and not a initiating subject, it is harder to justify and legitimise one's actions. The common goals must be negotiated between human and non-human actors, taking into account all sorts of needs.¹⁷¹

Sheikh proposes whether we could take the care for objects and ideas and extend that to the world at large, from objects to hyper-objects, and from history to futurity. Curating and art making can be seen as forms of future projections, setting up horizons of the possible and the impossible, as world-making. But whose goals, present and future we are talking about, and how much longer? The hyper-objects force humans to coexist in a future “without us”.¹⁷² If the notion of the world is replaced with intimacy and care, the afterworld would be shared with all things including the non-human. Curating as a type of worlding includes objects and their possible agencies, but it always includes selection and exclusion of things and ideas. No booklet nor exhibition

¹⁷⁰ Morton 2013, 15–19.

¹⁷¹ Lummaa 2016, 278.

¹⁷² Morton 2013, 94.

can give space to all things at all times, but as an assemblage of things they can create a space from which to view things otherwise not in view, establishing a worldview.¹⁷³

“It’s based on a realisation: ”Ha! It’s not something but someone, it’s alive.”¹⁷⁴

“I talk about intuitive practice of observing and perceiving. About spending time with plants and asking them what would they like to do, or what would they like me to do.”¹⁷⁵

To let the plants be and appear within their own framework is one of the challenges philosopher Michael Marder outlines. One should at the same time consider them as similar objects to humans, but to avoid the objective descriptions of plants and to preserve their alterity.¹⁷⁶ This is easier said than done. During this research process I have together with the interviewed artists truly discovered how plants are drastically different from everything else measured in human terms. Through her intuitive practice of observing and perceiving Kausalainen has learnt to spend time with plants and ask them questions. However, the idea of posing questions to plants connotes a strong humanising impression, and to her it practically means to enter a stage of sensual sensory being, rather than something rational and verbal. To Kausalainen thinking and working with

¹⁷³ Sheikh 2016, 158.

¹⁷⁴ Kausalainen 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Marder 2013, xiv.

plants has to do with the difference: how the plant’s body is so different from hers, and its perception of the world is so different from ours. What can we learn from them, and what can they tell us?¹⁷⁷ One of the reasons why vegetal beings have been unlimitedly used and exploited, is that one fails to detect the slightest resemblance to human life in them. Even though they are living creatures, one easily passes a negative judgement of their worth. In Western philosophy and thought, non-animal living beings have always suffered marginalisation. Often they have been regarded even too insignificant and mundane to deserve the title “others”, and the question of their being has not been question-worthy.¹⁷⁸ Considering this, how is it possible for one to encounter plants? And how can one, in this encounter, maintain and nurture plants’ otherness without fetishising and humanising them?¹⁷⁹

“It seizes and something happens inside a person’s head. The moment is fruitful for something to click. One thinks for a second in a different way.”¹⁸⁰

The quotation above describes Ziegler’s artistic motivation well. She aims to create moments, happenings and events, when something seizes the member of an audience and makes her think for a second in a different way. To encounter plants and take them into consideration as they

¹⁷⁷ Kausalainen 2017.

¹⁷⁸ Marder 2013, 2.

¹⁷⁹ Marder 2013, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Ziegler 2017.

are is difficult, because being informed does not yet mean being knowledgeable, not to mention involved. One can argue that the knowledge can only result from a process of transformation of one's understanding of the topic, and the world, which in turn comes through the practice of transforming the world itself.¹⁸¹ According to Marder, when instrumentalising plants, one does not yet encounter them, even though their outlines become a little more definite. To encounter plants, Marder suggests something what he calls plant-thinking. Instead of confronting plants as objects of knowledge, plant-thinking encourages to engage in an interactive relationship. Plant-thinking situates the plant at the centre of its world without appropriating it. Whenever human beings encounter plants, two or more worlds and temporalities converge. If one accepts this principle, one already lets plants to maintain their otherness, respecting the uniqueness of their existence.¹⁸²

“It needs courage to grow.”¹⁸³

Like Marder, I would like to consider plant-thinking as a promise and a name for an encounter that acts as an invitation to artists and curators to abandon the familiar terrain of human and humanist thought and to meet vegetal life as it is.¹⁸⁴ Like artistic and curatorial practices,

¹⁸¹ What, How & for Whom/WHW 2016, 140.

¹⁸² Marder 2013, 8.

¹⁸³ Wu 2017.

¹⁸⁴ Marder 2013, 9–10.

plant-thinking practices are embodied, finite and material expressions. Even though the interviewed artists did not share a common understanding of using plants in their artistic practices—some simply used them as materials and others as companions in thinking—they all emphasised plants' active role in the process of making art. Wu's quotation above reflects well the common and slightly humanising approach towards plants. Even though plants are not considered very active beings, and the predominant usage of the verb 'to vegetate' is linked heavily to the passivity or inactivity of animals or human beings, the original history relates to the opposite of this meaning: the fullness and richness of life. As sessile¹⁸⁵ beings plants do alter their state by growing and decaying, but not changing their position. According to Marder, Mancuso and Viola, plants like all beings articulate themselves spatially, in a body language free from gestures. The researchers use the word *language* to describe this vegetal self-expression taking into account its spatial materiality. Plants are *collective beings* and their modular bodies comprise of multiplicities without single organs.¹⁸⁶ They are divisible beings with several “command centres” and a web-like (almost Internet-like) structure. Mancuso and Viola argue that they share the same five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch—that are all developed in a plant-like manner. Plants are able to recognise their place in the world, interact with other plant beings, insects and animals. They communicate among themselves through molecules and chemical compounds

¹⁸⁵ An organism fixed in one place; immobile.

¹⁸⁶ Marder 2013, 75; Mancuso & Viola 2017, 11.

and exchange information. They even speak to each other, recognise their relatives and have different characters.¹⁸⁷ Plants do shake up the metaphysical distinction between sameness and otherness¹⁸⁸.

“Sensuality is what separates them from something else. The respect for nature and being close to the nature, is one of the reasons why I want to work with plants.”¹⁸⁹

To Valkonen the sensuality associated to workings with plants is very important. When she was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts she felt displeased with the studies and realised that art studies should have contained sensuality studies to sharpen one’s senses or to expand one’s perception. There were lots of theory studies and technical guidance, but everyone was responsible for their own relation to sensual things. In the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Schelling believed that sensuality, and its opposite irritability, were the quantum forces infusing every living entity. Even though the sensibility of plants is close to zero, the irritability ensure their survival, and enable them with a certain non-conscious thinking. If irritability defines a passive and non-conscious thinking, then to live is already to think.¹⁹⁰ Even though plants do not have brains, they can react to the stimulus or irritation coming from outside,

¹⁸⁷ Mancuso & Viola 2017, 11-12.

¹⁸⁸ Marder 2013, 76, 84-85.

¹⁸⁹ Valkonen 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Schelling 2004, 146; Marder 2013, 156.

and be aware of themselves and their surroundings¹⁹¹. Reclaiming the differences and nuances of plant-thinking requires counterbalancing with the non-conscious with a focus on the specific intentionality of vegetal life. Because, not all living beings share the same set of concerns, life-worlds, and modes of signification.¹⁹²

From an anthropocentric perspective plants seem as non-interactive beings, uninvolved in their own existence. Vegetal indifference is sometimes despised and sometimes idealised as a counterpart to constant human immersion in significant and insignificant affairs. But could the idealisation of vegetal freedom reflect a utopian image of human freedom from necessity and need? In everyday life humans also behave in a plant-like way, sometimes without having a individualised self and not caring for their being. As material and ideal beings, plants present a counterpoint to human desires and involvements in the world.¹⁹³

“Plants have given me so much in my own practice or helped me in my thinking and seeing, in processing things. It is a conversation partner who in its silent presence always knows to ask the right counter question, or challenges or faces me to think in another way.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Mancuso & Viola 2017, 11-12.

¹⁹² Marder 2013, 158.

¹⁹³ Marder 2013, 132-133.

¹⁹⁴ Kausalainen 2017.

If one considers intelligence as a way to solve problems rather than an exception in the order of life and the evolutionary process, one might gain an access to the yet-uncharted terrain of plant-thinking, just like artist Kausalainen seems to have done.¹⁹⁵ In these urgent times, just as 15,365 scientists from 184 countries have signed a statement that acknowledges humankind's failure to solve environmental challenges unleashing a mass extinction event, "wherein many current life forms could be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century"¹⁹⁶, many of us are tempted to imagine safe utopias or apocalyptic dystopias. However, to be truly present, in fact, Donna Haraway suggests to stay with the trouble with unfinished configuration of places, times, matters and meanings. Staying with the trouble requires making kins, as a practice of learning to live and die well, to think-with with each other and other beings.¹⁹⁷ Human beings are already akin to plants, because sometimes like them, one acts without one's heard while upholding certain non-conscious logic and consistency in one's acts of living. On no account does Haraway or Marder propose to undertake brainless decision making, but the engagement in plant-thinking could set humans to the path of making kins, to becoming-plant. This kind of thinking means to think *with* life, not *against* it. Whether it has to do with a plant or a human, *it thinks* points towards the thinking of life itself.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Marder 2013, pp. 154–155.

¹⁹⁶ Ripple et al. 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Haraway 2016, 1–4.

¹⁹⁸ Marder 2013, 159–160, 165–166.

5. Conclusions and reflections

5.1. Being with other beings

In 2008 the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-human Biotechnology released a report titled *The Dignity of Living Beings with Regard to Plants. Moral Consideration of Plants for Their Own Sake*¹⁹⁹. This government-appointed body released recommendations for the ethical treatment of plants and came up with the following conclusions: arbitrary harm caused to plants is considered morally reprehensible, complete instrumentalisation of plants—as a collective, as a species, or as individuals—require moral justification, vegetal life deserves to be treated with kind dignity like all other living beings, and no one may handle plants entirely according to his/her own desires. Finally, modification of plants should always involve consideration of conserving and protecting the natural biodiversity.²⁰⁰ Even though these recommendations were probably one of the first ones published by a government-appointed body, to Marder the document failed to inquire into the being of plants, and their unique take on life. Like Marder, in this thesis I have been emphasising the importance of cultivating a way of thinking not only *about* plants, but also with them, and *with* and *in* the environment, from which they are not separate.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Willemsen (ed.) 2008.

²⁰⁰ Willemsen (ed.) 2008.

²⁰¹ Marder 2013, 180–181.

To answer my research questions I have to start from the second one: *can new materialism and post-humanism help us to start seeing plants differently?* According to Lange-Berndt, Barad, Bennet, and Kontturi, new materialism considers material factors as active agents shaping human and non-human relations. All entities and processes are composed of matter and material forces. Rather than a property of things, matter can be understood as dynamic and shifting entanglements of relations, or phenomena produced through intra-actions of multiple apparatus of bodily production. Different boundaries are constituted through material-discursive practices, and these discursive practices are material (re)configurations of the world. Additionally, instead of a fixed essence, matter is not a thing but a doing. To be complicit with the material is to acknowledge the non-human.²⁰² If one considers plants as such materials, affecting artistic and curatorial processes—not to mention everyday decision making like stated above—new materialism can thus help us to see plants as active and agential beings with shifting relations.

Similarly, post-humanism searches for alternative ways to understand the qualities and properties of different beings, such as plants. To Lummaa & Rojola, Morton, Bogost, and Marder post-humanism suggests to abandon the worldview connected to the idea of a human being superior to other beings, and sees nature as material and processual phenomena. To understand plants differently, object-

²⁰² Lange-Berndt 2015; Barad 2015; 2003; Bennet 2010; Kontturi 2012.

oriented ontology encourages one to consider oneself as an object among other objects. Through hyper-objects, such as climate change, human experience of our surroundings change, and one begins to transfer into a object. In the end, this might even affect the human decision and policy making. To engage with plant-thinking invites people to abandon the familiar terrain of human and to meet vegetal life as it is.²⁰³

“It’s a great gift! It feels like the world opens up. I have sometimes said that one is never alone, but has friends everywhere.”²⁰⁴

How are these theoretical concepts reflected in artistic and curatorial practices? The interviewed artists had very different approaches to working with living plants. Some used plants as precious materials to work with and some as companions to think with. Essi Kausalainen’s method of working with plants was the most radical. After getting to know “the world of plants” with some help from biologists, and new materialist and post-humanist thinkers, she had decided not to include actual living plants in her performances anymore, because the exhibition venues are usually bleak places not suited for plants, without any natural light. Additionally, her practice had changed from working alone now working with other people, sharing a dialogue and a collective

²⁰³ Lummaa 2016; Lummaa & Rojola 2016b.; Morton 2013; Bogost 2012; Marder 2013.

²⁰⁴ Kausalainen 2017.

working method. The realisation of plants as beings, as someones, had changed her thinking thoroughly. To her it felt like the world had opened up, and that one now had friends everywhere. However, her approach to plants is not humanising or romanticising, thinking and posing questions to plants meant to her to enter a stage of sensory being. She talked about intuitive practice of observing and perceiving, which is based on the difference of human and vegetal bodies. Through Marder's plant-thinking Kausalainen was interested in plants' perception of the world, and what can we learn from them, and what they can tell us.²⁰⁵

"I'm interested in the relationship between man and nature. How is human seen in relation to nature: is he a separate agent or part of nature, or perhaps above nature?"²⁰⁶

During the past two years the audience has come to know Raimo Saarinen as "the artist who works with plants". In May 2016 Yle's Kulttuuricocktail²⁰⁷ interviewed him for a story quite naively titled *Taiteilija, pelasta meidät ilmastonmuutokselta!* [Artist, save us from the climate change!] and asked what could artists do to stop global warming²⁰⁸. Saarinen is interested in the relationship between man and nature, and sees that art can affect the public

²⁰⁵ Kausalainen 2017.

²⁰⁶ Saarinen 2017.

²⁰⁷ Culture journalistic program online, on radio, and on television. Produced by Yleisradio, Finland's national public service broadcasting company.

²⁰⁸ Heikkinen 2016.

opinion, but does not want to take a clear role as a climate artist. Saarinen makes sculptures of living plants, and treats them as any precious materials. He respects the material and works according to its requirements. Whenever the project ends, Saarinen usually dismantles the sculptural pieces, and plants the plants into new pots. He might even use them in another work in the future. The watering systems built for the sculptures are usually aesthetic choices to emphasise the aspect of life and care. Usually, he or somebody working at the exhibition venue has to water the plants manually. When asked about the affect of materiality in his work, Saarinen gave quite pragmatic answers. He could not thoroughly explain how the art process proceeded, because to him the practice of making art is based on feelings and intuition, and the way to express his thoughts and concerns without using verbal perception. I wonder whether this difference of the ability to verbalise one's practice has to do with the art medium Kausalainen and Saarinen use. As a performance artist without any actual objects of art Kausalainen might be more custom to explain and describe her work. When we talked about the ethical treatment of plants for sculptural artworks, Saarinen emphasised the importance of properly handling the plants, but was at the same time concerned about his own mental-being and whether he should start blaming himself over the usage of something living in his art.²⁰⁹ His worries demonstrate precisely the difficulty of the conceptual self-objectification that object-oriented ontology requires for one to consider oneself as an object among other objects.

²⁰⁹ Saarinen 2017.

“To me, plants mean the present tense and photographs are always in the past.”²¹⁰

Having a background also in biology, Maija Savolainen had a slightly different approach to working with living plants. Savolainen conducted two plant growth experiments at gallery Hippolyte in 2016 and at gallery Titanik in 2017, and is interested in the photographic expression defined by sunlight. In the same way how light outlines or makes things visible in photographs, one can deduce from the shape of a plant what kind of light it has been exposed to. But when experimenting with different wavebands of light, Savolainen’s approach to working with plants was quite scientific. She used them as a medium rather than treating them as unique individuals. However, Savolainen did give exhibition’s leftover fuchsias to her friends, who after a couple of months started reporting and sending photos of the plant growth on Facebook. In a new materialist sense, to her, it was lovely to hear that through its materiality the exhibition continued to live on its own.²¹¹ Most of all Savolainen is interested in light, but through these two exhibitions she had started to pay more attention to plant detail. How they grow and change at a totally different phase than anything else. To her the exposure time for plants was the whole exhibition but to photographs it is only one millisecond. In this way, the ever-changing exhibition process highlighted the fact that plants are always in the present and photographs in the past. And how it is important to be in the moment.

²¹⁰ Savolainen 2017.

²¹¹ Ibid.

“We want live and talkative social people, we don’t want dead plants!”²¹²

Yiyi Wu and Aoi Yoshizawa ended up working with plants, because they wanted to work with something really normal and familiar to everyone in order to create a situation where people could come and work for each other. Before leaving abroad on a summer holiday, people could bring their plants to the Plant Hotel and rely on other people watering them. The plants worked as a medium for a socially engaged design practice. As an everyday attractive commodity plants were easy to approach, and Wu gathered owner’s stories of their plant’s characteristics. Every “customer” watering the plants could mark their visit to the plant card and read other people’s stories. In this way Plant Hotel did take into consideration every plants uniqueness and characters, but from a very humanising perspective. Wu is more interested in what kind of meanings and new social relations one can convey through the act of watering plants, rather than plants as actual beings. In addition, Plant Hotel project was realised in several elderly houses, and the comment above by an elderly woman at a house depicts well the common understanding of plants. However, after the experiment at the house has ended, the residents of the house felt the need to bring their own plants to fill the common spaces that now seemed really empty.²¹³ There is something in the plants’ materiality and presence that people appreciate.

²¹² Wu 2017.

²¹³ Ibid.

“One of my favourite aspects is the chaos we create. It’s one of the things that has been forgotten in our world of products. Working with materials creates not dirt but a mess, which is part of the process.”²¹⁴

Ilona Valkonen’s Vieno Motors project emphasises every plant’s characteristics, their aesthetics and splendour through adorning the audience members with provocative and sensual flower accessories and arrangements. It pays a respect to other recycled materials used in the project as well. Even though to a common audience member Vieno Motors appears highly plant-based, to Valkonen the collegial and processual aspects are the most important. Valkonen treated plants according to their specific requirements, but as materials bought for this purpose only. However, Valkonen emphasised that the plants she worked with, were already dead as part of the cut flower industry. The flowers offered by the wholesale are very far from nature and natural. Even though they remind one of nature, they are actually part of the throw-away culture, and she saw the project as a sad celebration to the current throw-away society. Nevertheless, Valkonen appreciated the sensuality related to working with living plants. Words like *sensibility*, *processuality*, *sensuality*, *tangible*, *empathy*, *ethicality*, *love*, *presence*, and *respect* were mentioned several times during all the artists’ interviews. To Valkonen, it was important to emphasise the actual materiality of working with different materials, the possible chaos and mess they might create, but also their protective aspect when one could concentrate on the actual process of

²¹⁴ Valkonen 2017b.

creating instead of worrying about the audience. In this way, one could argue that the agential materials took part in the process by actively shaping the course of the performance. Like Savolainen, Valkonen appreciated being in the moment, and this is something she tries to actively draw people into. Gently guiding people away from the thought that often comes: “how long will this last?” to actually question how expedient it is to keep the work in the fridge for a week rather than enjoying it fully for this one evening?²¹⁵

“Of being in the world as a human being.”²¹⁶

Having a background in sculpting, Denise Ziegler’s approach to working with plants was very pragmatic and concrete. Even though many of her works include living plants, she treats them like any other material, and is more interested in the way people perceive the world. She uses the anthropomorphic phenomenon of houseplants standing-in for a person in several of her works, and asks what it is to be a human being. According to Ziegler, too often people accept the things as they are and forget to question. Through her work Ziegler tries to provoke situations and thoughts, that just for a one moment people could perceive the world differently. Ethically Ziegler did not have a problem of using living plants in her art, or even purposefully killing them if it the idea required it. On the contrary, she emphasised that it is always a matter of choice which materials one regards

²¹⁵ Valkonen 2017b.

²¹⁶ Ziegler 2017.

more important than others. In one of her latest ephemeral and public projects *Tansy Tour* (2016) Ziegler guided a tour through different parking places (Parking 24h) in the city centre of Pori. Tansies are typical plants growing quickly on wastelands, indicating areas that are left alone. Even though the project did not really provoke a situation where the audience could put themselves on the same line as non-human beings, it did pay attention to something usually regarded as non-thought-worthy.²¹⁷

This two-piece curatorial and academic master thesis is based both on theory and artists' interviews. I would like to think of the notions, opinions, utterances and proposals stated in this study as a model for new kind of contemporary working method between humans and non-human beings. Unfortunately, I did not have the possibility to observe the artistic processes on the spot, so the empirical thesis data relies heavily on the interviewees' descriptions. Artists emphasised that how the final artwork was formed was not alone the result of the artist's conscious work. According to Kontturi emphasising the processuality of the artistic practice puts human and non-human actions at the same level, acknowledging them both as active components of the process.²¹⁸ In my curatorial process the materiality made itself present in many ways: when having interesting discussions with the interviewed artists over a nice cup of tea, when actually writing the thesis on my laptop at libraries and my home filled with houseplants, when sketching

²¹⁷ Ziegler 2017.

²¹⁸ Kontturi 2012b.

and drawing the illustrations in my old-fashioned sketch book, and choosing the right coloured pencil tones for colouring them, when compiling and laying out the selected quotations and illustrations for the curatorial booklet, and finally feeling, touching and choosing the right kind of printing paper. However, I would argue that one cannot fully grasp the material and physical processes, and the flow of materiality, since there is no place outside materiality to observe these processes from. If matter comes to matter through world's intra-activity, its performativity, and agency can be seen as matter of changes and the possibilities in apparatuses of bodily production, matter is not a thing but a doing.²¹⁹ In this way, through artists' project descriptions and my curatorial reflections I have been able to convey something about the experiences of working with materials, of working with living plants.

Even though, I have become very informed about the different aspects of plant life through this thesis process, to actually take plants into consideration as they are, is still difficult. I have not really changed my style of living, and even started eating meat again after starting to expect my unborn child. When we slightly touched on concerns of ethical eating, Kausalainen noted that in ecological and environment ethos one easily slips into an illusion that there is a place outside destruction.²²⁰ One has to eat plants in order to survive. One can argue that the knowledge can only result from a process of transformation of one's understanding of the topic, and

²¹⁹ Barad 2003, 827–828.

²²⁰ Kausalainen 2017.

this in turn comes through the practice of transforming the world itself. The process of transformation is really slow, but could making a thesis on this particular topic count as a beginning of a such transformative act?

What can we learn from working with living plants? As I have come across a number of occasions during this research process, the actual task of building connections between the human and the non-human, organic and non-organic beings, is not easy. In order to answer the question stated above, I would like to present few notions on how new materialism, post-humanism, and plant-thinking can help us on our way to a more sustainable future. To encounter plants, and to engage in plant-thinking means to take side of the plant and to work for the sake of the plant through extended thinking and doing.²²¹ From a new materialist perspective one cannot treat vegetation merely as an object, since it is also an agent related to its other. However, one's concern with a particular plant cannot also afford to take place at the expense of the entire ecological community. From the point of view of object-oriented ontology, the same goes for humans.²²² Even though plants are silent in their presence, they do not lack spatial and material self-expression. One's incapacity to communicate with plants might lead to a risk of objectifying them, and speaking for them. The plants have taught the interviewed artists and me to appreciate the actual process of unfinished thinking, reflection, making art and curating, to be in the moment,

²²¹ Marder 2013.

²²² Morton 2013.

but to also be critical, to question, to create discussions and debate, and to be more aware. Working with living plants show a certain kind of sensibility and respect for the nature, encourage to take more time, and challenge us and the viewer to another kind of temporality, to a different way of being.

Finally, how could all this eventually affect our worldview, and our future? I see curating as a form of future projection and a process of world-making. According to Sheikh to not only navigate the world, but to also care for it, one must think curating as a form of care-taking on a planetary level²²³. To include objects and their possible agencies, from an object-oriented ontology perspective, means also to exclude other things and ideas. It is impossible to take into consideration all things at all times. Through this research I am emphasising the notions of intimacy and care, and hoping to shed a light on things otherwise not in view, to create a worldview that includes the non-human. As Valentine and Haraway stated previously, to bear the current environmental issues, to stay with the trouble, is to bring plants "to life" through different artistic means for other people to see and experience. And for it to truly matter, the work needs to evoke action. As material and idea beings, plants do present a counterpoint to human desires and involvements in the world. Maybe the vegetal indifference could pose a counterpart to perpetual human immersion in significant and insignificant affairs? But to be free in this way from all social bounds, solidarity, labour, culture, one's own existence, lead according to Steyerl

²²³ Sheikh 2016.

to a freedom from everything²²⁴. The current situation requires just to take responsibility of our actions, being accountable not only to our human-kins but also the whole environment, to think with life and not against it.

5.2. Thoughts on...

One of the outcomes of my two-piece master's thesis is the booklet *Thoughts on art, materiality, and plants*. Methodologically the creative process of curating and compiling the booklet has created new insights and understandings on the matter. Thus, the practice of the curatorial was not only a result, but also a methodological vehicle through which my research unfolds. However, my aim was to create a two-piece study, both parts of which function separately as well, and complement each other when necessary. I think I succeeded in this rather well. The quotations chosen for the booklet were taken from the artist interviews, and divided into three parts based on the three apparent themes rising from the interview data. I chose the quotations intuitively when reading the interview data diffractively. This meant to search for meanings and contexts that mattered, and made a difference in my research topic. Through the quotations, my aim was to build new insights on the topic. I decided to use both Finnish and English language to emphasise the importance of what the interviewees said and how they said it.

²²⁴Steyerl 2015.

I chose not to include any photos of artworks or exhibitions discussed in the interviews, because these pictures would not have been directly related to my particular interest. I was more interested in the actual descriptions of the artistic processes, artists' ideas, and approaches to working with living plants. Making the illustrations, however, was more problematic. In the beginning of the process I was fascinated by the taxonomic drawing style, but as the research proceeded, representationalism became an issue. The taxonomic method aims to capture the essence of the plant, but by assigning it to an exact genus, tribe, and so on, the system dispels every plant's singularity and uniqueness. Through the humorous and quite playful layout, I have tried to dispel the boundaries of representationalism, and emphasise the plants as they are. The illustrated plants are the same ones discussed in the interviews, appeared in artists projects and studios, and my home. For example, lace fern (*Asparagus setaceus*)²²⁵ started the whole process for Essi Kausalainen, Yiyi Wu got the idea of using plants in her service design project from growing avocados (*Persea americana*) at her home, Maija Savolainen used fuchsias (*Fuchsia gotenborg*) in her first plant growth experiment at Hippolyte, and African milk bush (*Euphorbia grantii*) is my oldest plant, that I received as a clipping present from a friend 10 years ago. After that I have given its clippings to many of my friends and colleagues, and the same plant has continued living in many different addresses and homes. If one considers this two-piece curatorial research through

²²⁵The plant's Finnish name 'unelma' suitably translates into 'a dream'.

Camnitzer's idea of need mentioned previously²²⁶, I would argue that my study is definitely needed for broadening the awareness of human and non-human relations.

The theoretical part of this thesis is based on studies and articles, that I consider trustworthy. I have been critical towards some of the lightest sources used, but when entering the uncharted terrain on unfinished thinking and plant-thinking, I have been quite flexible. The interviews are based on artists' descriptions of their work, their personal notions and opinions. However, situating the study in feminist research allows me to acknowledge that both knowledge and knowing are bound to time, place and especially the person, and thus very contextual and material. Artists' practices and my curatorial practice is of course affected by our personal interests. New materialism and post-humanism, including object-oriented ontology and plant-thinking, were both relevant theoretical concepts on which to build my research on. However, it is still sometimes quite hard for me to grasp how does one encounter plants as they are in practice, or considers oneself as an object among other objects in everyday life. I would argue that Kausalainen's artistic practice comes closest to realise these theories in action.

For further research it would make sense to engage with the actual process of working with living plants, or to observe the artists' practices on site and in action. To rely on artists' descriptions has its own risks, since not all of them are capable or comfortable to express themselves

²²⁶ Camnitzer 2016, 115-116.

verbally. Curatorially I would propose to increase the number of interviewees and take more time, and maybe to try Kausalainen's approach of observing and perceiving, and collectively try to encounter them as they are. When Carl von Linné created his taxonomic system, he added a reminder after the species name *homo sapiens*. "Nosce te ipsum", know yourself, refers to the fact that humans are just one species in the primate segment²²⁷. The current world is heavily modified by human but not in the control of human.

²²⁷ Lagerspetz 1966, 20; Lummaa 2016, 283.

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General

1. You are currently finishing your project/studies/exhibition/research in design/etc., could you briefly tell more about your general artistic/research practice?
2. How would you describe yourself as a researcher/artist/designer? In what kind of themes/topics are you usually interested?
3. How do you see your work in the current time, and the current environment?

Project questions (Yiyang Wu, Plant Hotel)

4. Through service design your aim was to provide opportunities for people to act as capable agents instead of served customers? Did it work?
5. How did the service create new social relations? How did it challenge existing social boundaries?
6. How did people react on the service? How did the audience/customers interpret the service?
7. Did the service generate any new kinds of rules/practices or outcomes?

Working with plants

8. Why did you choose to use living plants as a medium in your work? Where did the idea come from?
9. Do you have an aesthetic or rather philosophical approach towards working with plants?
10. Could you describe your working process. Could you

name few of the challenges related to working with plants.

11. What does working with plants mean to you? Do the plants represent something to you?
12. Did you feel the urge to water the plants while running the Plant Hotel? Was it important to take care of the plants during the project? What if the plants have died?
13. Did you find it challenging to work with something that's alive? What happened to the plants after the project?

