

Radical Plants

Plant blindness, economy and Camilla Berner's PLANT Museum

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Plants are slow and there are many of them. That gives plants long odds in the battle for attention in a society that celebrates speed and originality. Biologists talk of plants being in a blind spot in our culture. "Plant blindness", as the phenomenon is called, is both culturally and evolutionarily psychological. Our brains must constantly sort through millions of sensory inputs, and it is therefore necessary to ignore useless and harmless things in our field of vision. Plants become background in the terrain, because they are neither dangerous nor a source of energy rich nourishment.

In modern times the battle for attention has become even more difficult. There is no real wilderness anymore, at least not in a totally cultivated land like Denmark. Here there are gardens, parks and farmland where plants become a part of the architecture. Forests are scarce and thoroughly regulated. It is modernity's most fundamental division, namely the division of nature and culture that has made it possible to limit and control nature down to a single blade of grass. Nature has therefore become a place that is either weak or absent. It is out there, separate from us. In recent times our concept of nature as an outsider has been strengthened by the climate crisis and pandemics, both of which have been caused by people penetrating too far into nature's exclusive places. However, plants continue growing, out of our sight! They can neither be limited nor controlled. They spread their seeds via insects and wind. They take root in every nook and cranny, and they do it in different ways and in varying tempos.

Camilla Berner, in many of her art projects, has worked here in the plant blind spot. She gathers and describes plants, and she moves them into museums, from their living places in weather-beaten and overseen areas of the inner city, apartment blocks, or, as here, in the backyard of an exhibition venue in Odense.

Such places – overgrown gardens – are used by the French philosopher Georges Bataille, as an example of an economics logic that precedes modern economic thought. Bataille writes that plants grow according to an economics logic that is based on surplus and sharing, and that stands in opposition to the market economy, which is based on restrictions and exchanges. Bataille uses the garden path as an example of a place where the gardener's hoeing can only temporarily

hold back the pressure of the surrounding plants. The path quickly becomes overgrown again, as long as the plants have access to natural resources - sun, water and soil – that don't demand payment or something in exchange They grow until they can't grow anymore.

The modern persons economy is based on limits, because only by setting limits can we set a price on a product. Limits make it possible to exchange one thing for another in a way that is not possible if it is free for the taking. Our consumer society and the artworld are based on limits, as seen clearly for example, in photography and limited-edition prints, where constructed limits increase the value of the single object. Plants grow wild, without consideration to our plans. They are part of an economy that strives fundamentally against economic rationalism. Plants give, whereas people exchange, according to Georges Bataille. His point is that plant economics preceded the exchange economy. Plants own places are not just a temporary break from modern life where we can find peace and mindfulness, plants grow wild and with a logic that is radically different from the exchange logic we have become used to thinking into all aspects of our lives.

Camilla Berner uses museum tactics to force us to see plants in a new way, namely, with the help of the museums' methods of classifying, describing and highlighting the particular characteristics of a plant.

The artist's small, budding museums, such as PLANT Museum, show that it isn't necessary to go further than our own backyard to see something that is wildly radical, yet completely ordinary.