Interview: Plant Pleasures and Intimacies with Céline Baumann

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Interview: Plant Pleasures and Intimacies with Céline Baumann

Céline Baumann is a French landscape architect and a graduate of the École Nationale Supérieure du Paysage in Versailles (2010). She established her eponymous practice, Studio Céline Baumann, in Basel in 2019. She aims through an intersectional lens to create dynamic open spaces informed by the interactive ecology between people and nature. This design work is complemented by a commitment to research, allowing her to explore the collective value of nature and its impact on individuals. She is the author of a number of essays including an article on queer nature and another on the intimacy of the kiwi and the crocus. The conversation transcribed below took place in June 2022.

Antónia Szabari: Can we think together about the place of plants in large-scale systems and human-created institutions, including everything from climate change and urbanization to capitalism and colonialism? For instance, Natania and I became interested in Guy de La Brosse (1586–1641), a famous seventeenth-century botanist who is also a physician to the King and an alchemist who founds the Jardin du Roy (now the Jardin des Plantes in Paris). He clearly had some good intentions for the Jardin, which was designed in part to make plants available to more people for medicinal use and other beneficial activities. But at the same time the Jardin is an instance of consolidated state power and a reflection of French absolutism and colonial empire. What does it mean to you to work with plants in today's world, given the history of this and other European gardens?

Céline Baumann: This is quite a broad question! Plants, how they are organized in outdoor space, are the primary material of my practice as a landscape architect, just as architects work with bricks and mortar. This work gives me the chance to link the natural and the urban, a connection that is important today, given that we live in an extremely artificial world featuring a strong dichotomy between what is "natural" and what is "man-made." The Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia refers to the notion of human chauvinism[1] to explain how we tend to consider ourselves superior to nature when, in fact, we are a mere part of it. Our influence on the planet is so dire that we cannot just think of ourselves solely as urban animals.

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Parks and gardens are still in some way places of power, as they were in the seventeenth century, although this power might be softer nowadays. My interest lies in the layered functions of these places: they are not only representative, fully usable spaces for citizens where a showy flora is displayed, but they also provide a whole range of 'ecological services': creating cooling islands, providing shade, cleaning the air, and acting as ecological habitats. These functions are more widely acknowledged today and give to urban open spaces a new role: hosting humans and non-humans within otherwise somewhat hostile urban surroundings.

Natania Meeker: Thank you for the wonderful introduction to your work. In the past, you have cited moments in the history of botany or the history of taxonomy, like the Linnaean turn, for instance, that are helpful for understanding how our current predicament regarding the objectification of nature came to be. We were wondering if there were moments of resistance, moments that cut against that dominant botanical history, that were inspiring for you. Do you ever look to queer and/or feminist forebears for inspiration? Is there another history there to be excavated?

AS: The history of botany is relevant today in part because the life of plants remains somewhat cryptic. For example, the sexuality of plants is not immediately visible; it is a question that comes to the surface with time, as is the case for other aspects of the life and physiology of plants. Moreover, there is a good reason to look at the development of botany as not entirely linear; for example, even Aristotle struggled with questions that are still relevant today. Does this history inform your work?

CB: The history of botany and its queer/feminist implications are part of the research on "queer nature" that I started to develop about five years ago. The sexuality of plants was somewhat unfamiliar to me beforehand, even though I am a practicing landscape architect. When I started to investigate that topic, I went to parks and gardens to collect plant specimens, studying their characteristics and making herbaria. The more I discovered about plant sexuality, the more surprising and exciting it became. I discovered that there is a tremendous amount of sexual diversity in the plant world; plants can be female and/or male, they can be hermaphroditic (described by botanists as "perfect" flowers), and they can change their gender over time.

These studies led me later to research the history of the discovery of sexuality in the vegetal kingdom, which turned out to be very surprising and

controversial. Plant sexuality was acknowledged very late in the history of natural sciences, only during the eighteenth century, although animal sexuality had been known of since prehistoric times. Pollination had been used either for agricultural purposes—for instance by the Assyrians, who pollinated date palms—or for horticultural purposes to create new varieties of flowers, one of the most famous examples being Dutch tulip production during the Golden Age. It was nevertheless not recognized as a sexual process as such. Indeed, nature was at the time commonly considered either asexual or feminine, with an emphasis on the beautiful, fragrant or delicate qualities of certain plant species, traditionally linked to femininity. Acknowledgement of plant sex challenged this archetype of nature. This eye-opening discovery led me to take a more critical approach toward the set of values and standards that we live by.

I started to adopt this critical mindset vis à vis my profession too and began to interrogate the supposed gender neutrality of our city spaces. I recently came across a journal called *Heresies*, founded in 1977. Each issue was devoted to a different topic, including one on ecology [issue 13, 1981] and another on architecture [issue 11]. I remember reading a manifesto by Lesley Kanes Weisman, where she talks about cityscape as agency and discusses whose desires and wishes are taken into account in urban spaces.[2] These articles are from the 1970s and 80s, yet to me they seem very contemporary.

I am currently spending a lot of time in meetings with city planners, clients, and investors. Those people are the decision-makers who are shaping our built environment. They also tend to be mostly middle-aged white men. They tend to make gender-biased decisions, although they are mostly unaware of it. For instance, they decide on which sport amenities to build in public space, like soccer fields and skate parks, which are activities that are favored by younger boys. Games that are more feminine-coded, such as badminton and volleyball, are usually not as available. To realize that I can influence the construction of these spaces to promote more diverse ways of using and inhabiting them is for me a very recent and also powerful discovery.

NM: Since we are talking about plant sex, can we also discuss plant pleasure? In your work, do you think about cultivating different kinds of pleasures for plants as well as for people? What about pleasures that plants and people might share with one another? Can the cityscape become a space of new and different kinds of pleasure and intimacy? What might that look like?

CB: It's quite easy to give pleasure to plants, in a way. For humans it is a bit more difficult. [Laughter.] To give pleasure to plants, it all comes back to

giving them enough room, enough soil and water. This can be somewhat simply achieved by limiting both paved surfaces and the surface area of underground constructions, which can greatly constrain tree roots and therefore plants' growth potential. And if we give enough space for trees to develop, that also gives pleasure to people, especially now that we are faced with increasing city heat due to climate change. Trees help bring about a pleasurable city atmosphere, by providing a lot of shade and cooling the air thanks to evapotranspiration. They clean the atmosphere by collecting dust particles on their leaves and also provide habitats for insects and birds. These are all very simple 'ecological services' that plants are able to provide and that also create pleasurable environments for both humans and non-humans.

AS: I really like your interpretation of pleasure as plant growth but also as a kind of cohabitation. But imagining the pleasure of the plant also requires some amount of speculation on our part, doesn't it? We don't have straightforward access to the joys of the plant.

CB: Oh no, it is really easy actually because we can see them when they thrive. And thriving is pleasure!

AS: I would like to go back a little bit to the question of plant sexuality, which is often even stranger than it appears. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century botanists regularly portray plant sex as analogous to that of animals. But they also realize that the analogy does not really work, because plant sexuality remains fundamentally unlike animal sexuality, partly because plants have a dual, dibiontic life cycle. You are using the creativity or 'wildness' of plants to break down or interrogate certain human structures. So, when you say very convincingly that there cannot be a clean separation between vegetal life and the built environment, within our messy urban spaces, plants become a wild entity. As you were explaining, you were trying to create change in a context where others don't always recognize that change is possible or necessary, where it is taken for granted that certain spaces are arranged and gendered in a particular way. Critic Jack Halberstam calls the wild of desire post-natural, but your work and much of plant philosophy and art shows that we should not hurry beyond nature, in the sense of the concrete, material realm of biontic and abiotic animation, which can point the way toward other forms of sexuality and desire.[3] Plants tell us that sex in 'nature,' in the plant's life, is open and not aligned with the taxonomies and identities that we recognize.

CB: 'We' as humans are basing our knowledge on previously known facts. Aristotle was one of the first philosophers to discuss plant sexuality and to do so he compared the plant body to a version of the human body, but upside down. According to his analogy, a plant is like an inverted human being, in that the mouth and the head are inside the earth, feeding the plant, the legs are the branches, and the sexual parts are elsewhere, above.[4] When I started to do research on plant sexuality, I wondered why some plants are called "male" or "female." At first, this distinction did not make much sense to me, but then I came to understand that [according to the biological definition of plant sexual functions] the pollen is "male" because it is smaller and more dynamic, moving to meet the usually bigger and more passive "female," which is also the reproductive organ yielding seeds. Clearly, this is quite a heteronormative way to describe plant sexuality and it would be interesting to revisit it.

The fructification of flowers to produce various fruits, berries, and drupes is, at least for ornamental plants used in public space, often seen as a negative, dirty feature of their life, although flowering, and therefore fruit and seed creation, are, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful parts of a plant´s life cycle. I wish we would celebrate it a bit more. I would like to see more of this productive aspect integrated into our encounters with nature within the city. For instance, how can we have fruit-bearing trees in public space, where fruit is often seen as dangerous or messy? There are nevertheless a few remarkable exceptions to this rule. For instance, Sevilla in Spain is a city where streets are bordered with orange trees. The oranges, which are a sour varietal, are picked and made into marmalade. Then they are shipped to the UK where there is a demand for this kind of sour preserves. I find these stories about integrating the productive aspect of plants into the city beautiful.

AS: This reminds me of Michael Pollan's story about Johnny Appleseed [John Chapman]. American folklore associates the apple pie with Johnny Appleseed, a famous missionary and businessman who was known for planting apple orchards throughout the American mid-West and West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In fact, Pollan tells us, Johnny Appleseed's planted seeds grew into apple trees whose fruit was not necessarily sweet, since most wild apples are too tart to eat. (Only grafted apples preserve their sweetness across generations.) But these sour fruits are perfectly good for making cider. So Appleseed was welcomed everywhere not for his pie but for his alcohol![5]

CB: This leads us to the topic of asexual reproduction. We have been discussing sexual reproduction but it is important not to forget that plants mainly propagate vegetatively. The trees I buy from nurseries are propagated by asexual reproduction, thanks to cutting or grafting for instance. Vegetative multiplication creates clones, which display the exact same attributes (silhouette, height, color or sweetness of the apple) as the original specimen—advantageous from the nursery viewpoint. This is also a faster and more efficient process than "starting from scratch" by growing a tree from a seed. This commodification of nature is nevertheless problematic in term of genetic diversity. If all the trees planted share the same DNA, they will indeed look alike, but also share the same vulnerability to diseases and pests. A row of identical lime trees might for instance face similar issues if they are attacked by a pest and might thereafter all perish simultaneously. If the specimens are genetically diverse, on the other hand, then some individuals will die while others will survive. This is how the infamous Darwinian "survival of the fittest" takes place, a process that is crucial to allowing genetic diversity to prosper, even if it makes apples sour instead of sweet.

NM: The tension between sexual and asexual modes of reproduction becomes a tension between different ways of relating to plants under capitalist modes of production. At certain points, plant productivity cuts against capitalist economic forces, but there are also ways in which it can slot into that economy and participate in it.

AS: In another interview, you talk about growing a cactus from seed, rather than from a cutting. But some authors and artists have taken a special interest in the dual sexuality of plants, their dibiontic cycle, in which sexual and asexual reproduction, gamete-producing ("diploid") and spore-producing ("haploid") generations alternate. This cycle is specific to plants, difficult to translate into human terms, and not at all clearly defined around a gender binary, which can only be applied to half of the plant's life. The asexual reproductive stage is dominant in mosses and liverworts, but also present in other plants. We just tend to see and recognize the sexually reproducing plant generation.

NM: I am interested in how you see your work as dovetailing with decolonizing projects. Decolonial botany involves in part recognizing the way in which certain pleasures stem from traumatic, terrible histories. The pleasures that plants may give are also part of a history of human violence,

extraction, and exploitation; enjoyable botanical intimacies are also unevenly distributed or denied to certain groups. I wonder if you think about your work as decolonial, or what your relationship is to the project of decolonizing botany.

CB: By means of exploitation and greed, colonization brought an unprecedented variety of exotic species to Europe. A few of them were cash crops, but many more were solely ornamental. I am often intrigued by the ambiguous relation we have nowadays with this combination of exotic and indigenous plants. Planting plans in Switzerland have to include predominantly indigenous species, and this is checked by the authorities before a building permit can be delivered. But what constitutes an indigenous species?

Preconceived ideas notwithstanding, not all foreign plants are harmful for local ecosystems—only about 2% of foreign plants in Switzerland are invasive or potentially invasive—although some of them are. The Japanese knotweed, for instance, which was imported to Europe for ornamental purposes, is a dangerous invasive that destroys entire ecosystems. The summer lilac is also invasive but provides valuable nectar for butterflies. On the other hand, some plants cause damage in other parts of the world: the water hyacinth, which is harmless in Europe, is invasive in North America.

Colonial history plays an important role in the classification of plants as indigenous or foreign. This classification is actually very human-centered and can be called into question when we remember that the history of plants started hundreds of millions of years ago. In Europe, foreign plants are classified in two groups: neophytes and archaeophytes. Neophytes were introduced in "recent" history, i.e. after 1492, the date of the journey to the Americas by Christopher Columbus. The archaeophytes include plants having moved to Europe before that date, due to climatic changes like the ice ages, or as a result of older movements of people; an example of the latter phenomenon is the apple tree, which was brought to Europe during the time of the Silk Road. The Swiss artist Uriel Orlow created a work called "Geraniums are never red," in which he unmasks the process of transporting geranium flowers from South Africa to Switzerland. The geraniums, which are placed on the balconies of many chalets, have become a symbol of Swiss pride but they are in fact migrants. This history helps us question conventional archetypes of national identity.

Interestingly, climate change is shifting the discourse around 'native' plants as not all indigenous plants are adequately heat-resistant. For example,

beech trees are really struggling, and many evergreens are too. Today, cities are looking to plant trees able to survive in a warmer climate. My personal philosophy reflects the fact that a varied mix of plants from different origins is beneficial to all.

AS: We are always telling ourselves stories about the landscapes we inhabit. In Los Angeles, where white settlers tried to recreate the European landscape (with the lawn as a quintessential example) or to commodify an exotic landscape (with imported palms), planting indigenous plants can be a decolonial gesture in itself. At the same time, the story of indigenous plants is not the only one worth telling. Scholar Phillip Usher has discussed the lithic memory that salt and sandstone, two hallmarks of bourgeois consumption in sixteenth-century Caen, hold of a prehistoric tropical climate, something that the burghers who built their *hôtels* out of sandstone were hardly aware of.[6] This anecdote also reminds me that our history is much more weird than we often acknowledge; it is full of events that we no longer remember or we do not want to retell.

This brings us to another question: how do you make visible what we do not see about plants? For instance, the guerrilla botanical art of Mona Caron, who paints oversize weeds on sidewalks and walls of cities around the world, is a way of making visible plants we do not want to see, and drawing attention to the movement of plants. Planting a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous plants, as you suggest, can also be a way of highlighting the cosmopolitan nature of urban space, for example. How do you make visible the properties of plants, their histories of migration or their flexible sexualities? What do you do to help us notice the contributions plants make to our spaces and communities?

CB: I think a large part of it is related to storytelling, which provides alternatives to the dominant stories we get told about nature. My project on queer botany is about storytelling in this way: you cannot do everything in a museum! The most exciting way I have been conveying my discoveries is by giving tours in a park or a garden and talking about the plants we see through the lens of their sexuality, which is a 'true' story, not invented by or for humans. During those walks I show the different parts of the plant: this is the female flower, this is the male flower, this is the pollen, this is where the seeds are, these are the fruits that are being produced. You need a magnifying glass to be able to see everything because these parts are so small. But somehow this process of observation creates a point of contact with nature.

These are very modest gestures, but they allow other types of narratives about nature to unfold.

NM: Your description reminds me of eighteenth-century depictions of herborizing. Philosophers and scientists, but also members of the general public, including women, would go into the field—into the natural environment—and very carefully, but also very emotionally, connect with the plants. Someone like Jean-Jacques Rousseau really understood the transformative pleasure that is possible in the moment of the encounter with something small, local, and often ignored—a favorite plant! I really enjoy hearing how you cultivate these pleasures in a contemporary context. Is there anything you would like to add or would like to share that we have not asked about?

CB: I would like to bring up a final topic: the question of maintenance. Traditionally, what we find beautiful are large blooming flowers, while grass that is too high or not 'properly' mowed is considered neglected. I recently watched the documentary entitled *Natura Urbana* by Matthew Gandy about derelict lands in Berlin. Berlin has many open spaces and fallow lands [the *Brachen*], due to the World War II bombings. Gandy makes a point that this wildness is a crucial part of the artistic and aesthetic liberty that can be found in the *Hauptstadt*. 'Unkept' nature can be highly inspirational. Besides, what appears as a lack of maintenance is also from an ecological viewpoint usually a sign of a high degree of biodiversity.

AS: In Budapest, Hungary, the city created bee gardens, uncontrolled pieces of land where indigenous and other plants thrive along with pollinators, and a conservative group, the youth group of the ruling right-wing Fidesz party, has insisted on mowing them, in the name of order or nationalist botany.

CB: The British artist Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg was commissioned recently to make an artwork she called "Pollinator Pathmaker," where she decided to make a garden designed for insects' needs and not for human ones. To turn that hierarchy upside down and create a garden, which is a cultural artefact, primarily for other living beings is very interesting. Those kinds of paradigm shifts will hopefully spread and contribute new meaning to work with plants in today's world.

AS: I think this is a beautiful way of ending. Thank you for speaking with us!

Notes

1. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Dylan J. Montanari, trans. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).
2. Leslie Kanes Weisman, "Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto," special issue, "Making Room: Women and Architecture," *Heresies*, 11 (1981): 1–5.
3. Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke U P, 2020).
4. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* (circa 350 BCE), Arthur Platt, trans., *The Works of Aristotle*, John Alexander Smith and William David Ross, eds. (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1908), 44 (vol. 1) and 63 (vol. 2).
5. Pollan considers Johnny Appleseed a Dionysian figure, fostering biodiversity along with the pleasures of alcohol consumption.
6. Phillip John Usher, *Exterranean: Extraction in the Humanist Anthropocene* (New York: Fordham U P, 2019).