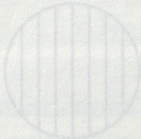



Post-normal
 design:
Emergent
approaches
towards plural
 worlds

Edited by
Alastair Fuad-Luke

Preface

Designing our times

Beatrice Leanza

Introduction

Moving beyond the present-normal design
of the Capitalocene

Alastair Fuad-Luke

I

Life relations:

Difference through pluriversal design

27 **Against Terricide:**

Designing as a practice of caring for the web of life

Arturo Escobar

41 **Imagining a Plurocene:**

Constructing multiple alter-realities in the present

Alastair Fuad-Luke

53 **From older people to butterflies:**

Design as the others!?

Yanki Lee

65 **Alter-natives:**

Designing as a poetics of relating

Martín Avila

73 **Listening to excess in pluriversal
contact zones**

Marisol de la Cadena

82 **Infrastructures of emplacement:**

A story about other-than-ecologies

Mario Blaser

II

Design practices: Everyday actions as emergent futures

- 92 **Negative design and Kainotecture**
McKenzie Wark
- 99 **Amplifying ecosystems:**
Interspecies media practices
Thomas Pausz
- 117 **Where do gardens come from?**
Orkan Telhan
- 127 **Can plants write?**
Phytography in the sculptures of Frans Krajcberg
Patrícia Vieira
- 135 **Decolonizing performative architecture**
Towards alternative models of climate sensitive design
Paolo Cascone
- 144 **Architect enablers and builders**
Producing spaces through the act of making
Collectif Etc
- 149 **Re-making everything, every day**
Zoy Anastassakis
- 159 **Dishwashing designer**
Pablo Calderón Salazar
- 163 **Futurivore:**
Co-creating everyday foods with insects and seaweed
Roseanne Kimber and Patrícia Csobánczi

III

Peripheral perspectives:

Reorientation towards post-normal design

- 171 **Peripheral Perspectives:**
The Friday Colloquia of Porto Design Biennale 2021
Alastair Fuad-Luke

Moderators' reflections post-colloquia

- 1st Friday
- 175 **Coda: Different Heterodoxies**
Miguel Carvalhais and Luísa Ribas
- 2nd Friday
- 179 **Designing for the planet**
Teresa Franqueira
- 3rd Friday
- 183 **Designing for "pluriversal contact zones"**
Alastair Fuad-Luke
- 4th Friday
- 187 **Design as nourishment for disobedient perspectives**
Teresa Fradique
- 195 **Reflections of the scientific committee**

Biographies of contributors

Can plants write?



Phytography
in the sculptures
of Frans Krajcberg

Patrícia Vieira

The Writing of Plants

The title of this text, “Can plants write?,” challenges us to consider the possibility of writing beyond humanity. To be sure, plants, animals and other living and non-living beings cannot write in the same way as humans do: they do not have verbal forms of communication and do not use pictorial characters to register their language. However, non-humans communicate not only within their species but also across species. This is very obvious in the case of animals. For instance, dogs bark to signal their presence to other animals, to defend their territory and to warn us, humans, of danger. Recent scientific research in the field of plant signaling and behavior has shown that, like animals, plants are capable of communicating with other plants of the same species, with plants of different species and even with animals. For example, when attacked by herbivores or by pathogens, plants emit volatiles (airborne chemicals) that warn other plants (both of the same species and even of different species) of the attack, so that they can protect themselves by producing substances that ward off the attackers.¹ Plants also communicate with animals, in particular insects. A well-known case is the bright colors and shapes of flowers, as well as the volatiles released by plants to attract insects for

1 Richard Karban, “The Language of Plant Communication (and How it Compares to Animal Communication),” in *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, ed. Monica Gagliano, John Ryan and Patrícia Vieira (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017), 3–26.

“If plants
communicate
amongst
themselves and even
with humans, and
have developed
non-verbal
languages to articulate
aspects of their
existence,
can they
also write?”

pollination, thus creating an appearance and a smell that is also agreeable to humans.

If plants even with languages chemicals communicate amongst themselves and humans, and have developed non-verbal (through their colour, shape and the they release, for instance) to articulate aspects of their existence, can they also write? My tentative answer is that plants write through their bodies, inscribing themselves in the world, including in the places we, humans, inhabit. Plants leave traces of themselves in the spaces they live in and these physical inscriptions can be regarded as a specifically vegetal form of writing. In another text, I have called this plant mode of writing phytographia, or phytography. I go back to French philosopher Jacques Derrida's notion of arche-writing that describes a generalized inscription of entities and events in their surroundings. For Derrida, all beings leave traces of themselves in the world, inscriptions that create the conditions of possibility for any language and for any kind of writing—human or non-human—to thrive.² In the rest of this text, I explore the possibility of plant writing, or phytography, in collaboration with human beings. What would such writing look like? And are there some examples of this phytography? I examine the work of Brazilian artist Frans Krajcberg as an example of collaboration between plants and humans to create a work of art that brings together vegetal forms of articulation, or phytography, and human artistic expression.

Plant Art and Activism

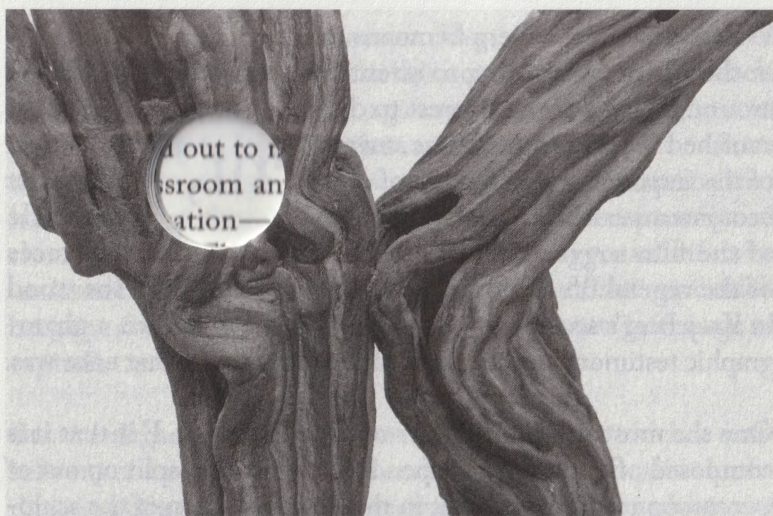
Polish born, Brazilian naturalized artist Frans Krajcberg (1921–2017) worked with materials he borrowed from nature for most of his career, including rock, found mineral tints, dust and vines. In the 1960s, he started to collect incinerated tree trunks—the

2 Patrícia Vieira, "Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing," *Environmental Philosophy*, 12.2 (2015): 205–220.

remains of once-lush tropical forests that stayed behind after forest fires—in order to create what were arguably to become his best-known and most emblematic pieces. Using the dead bodies of trees, he produced monumental sculptures that are an indictment of the massive devastation of old-growth rainforests to give way to agribusiness ventures in Brazil and throughout most of the world. The sculptures were a way for Krajcberg to express his indignation at the destruction of nature. In a documentary titled *Krajcberg: The Cry of Nature* (2013),³ directed by Paula Saldanha and Roberto Wernek, the artist half-jokingly says that he cannot go into the streets and scream against the devastation of the environment, an activity that would most likely land him in jail. Instead, he resorted to his art as a means to convey his anger at the decimation of forests, a hecatomb he frequently compares to the horrors of Nazism. Krajcberg lost all of his family to the Holocaust and, in *The Cry of Nature*, as well as in many other interviews, he states that watching trees intentionally being burnt to the ground reminds him of the human cruelty he witnessed first-hand during the Second World War. His art is therefore also a form of activism: a way to draw public attention to and denounce environmental crimes.

Krajcberg's art and activism was made possible by the dead trees he salvaged. The wood he used to create his works evokes the living trees it once was, which, in turn, metonymically stand for the forest ecosystems destroyed by fire. The trees-turned-wood are co-creators of the sculptures, which embody a specifically vegetal form of writing. The plants write through the display of their mutilated bodies, inscribing themselves in human cultural productions. One might conceive of a form of embodied memory that passes from the once-living tree, through the charred wood, to the sculpture, in an interspecies chain of meaning that also

3 Paula Saldanha and Roberto Wernek (dirs.), *Krajcberg: O Grito da Natureza* (RW Cine and TV Brasil, 2013).



La Révolte III. Frans Krajcberg, 1991 © Eric Sander for Chaumont sur Loire, 2018
Frans Krajcberg, *La Révolte III*, Tribute Exhibition at Domain of Chaumont-sur-Loire. Detail of the sculpture made using wood salvaged in the aftermath of human-induced fires that destroyed the Atlantic Forest.

bridges the age-old divide separating life from matter. Similar to Krajcberg, the plants are both artists and activists that spell the suffering of rainforests through a plant-human artwork. Phytography stands for this vegetal, material form of writing that often intersects with human forms signification.

Plant Rebellion

The sculpture “The Rebellion I” (“*La Révolte I*”), from 1991, exemplifies the phytography at work in Krajcberg’s sculptures. The piece was made using wood salvaged in the aftermath of human-induced fires that destroyed the Atlantic Forest surrounding the artist’s house and studio in Nova Viçosa, on the southern tip of the Brazilian state of Bahia. In another documentary about his work titled *Krajcberg: The Poet of Traces* (1986)⁴ by renowned filmmaker

4 Walter Salles (dir.), *Krajcberg: O Poeta dos Vestígios* (Videofilmes and Rede Manchete, 1986).

Walter Salles, Krajcberg bemoans the tragic loss of rainforest in the region. According to scientific estimates, it would take around 80 years for the forest to disappear, but it vanished in just half that time, a warning sign of the impending destruction of other rainforest ecosystems such as the Amazon. As the title of the film suggests, what remains are only traces of the vegetal life that once covered most of Brazil. The wood in Krajcberg's sculptures is therefore a trace of a trace, a phyto-graphic testimony to the legacy of the living forest that once was.

One of the most striking features of "The Rebellion I" is that it is composed of two semi-independent trunks that split up out of a common root, briefly meet in the middle section of the sculpture and then separate again, each dividing into a multitude of thinner branches. The structure of the work could be seen as an allusion to the intertwinement of flora in a forest. Trees that might appear, at first glance, to be discreet entities are in fact connected to other plants, fungi and animals in a web of exchanges that humans are only now beginning to understand. The phyto-graphy at play in the sculpture would thus draw attention to the particular mode of being in the world of plants. The flower-like shape at the top of one of the branches suggests that not only trees but all forms of existence can only flourish through such embeddedness in the web of life.

Given the origin of the wood used for the sculpture, though, its two semi-independent trunks might also be interpreted as standing for the fraught relationship between plants and humans. While humanity is deeply dependent upon vegetal life to meet its most basic need—breathing, nourishment, and so on—the fate of many plants is also increasingly impacted by human action. The striations painted with red natural pigments throughout this and many other sculptures by the artist evoke the colour of blood and could be seen as a reference to the destruction of countless trees and forests, a calamity that, as I mentioned above, Krajcberg

often compared to the Holocaust. The rebellion mentioned in the title of the work would, in this context, be both the rebellion of the artist against the destructive greed of his fellow humans and the rebellion of the plants themselves, outraged by the devastation that humanity inflicts upon flora. The separation of the trunks at the top of the sculpture could thus be understood as a phytographic representation of the opposition between forest life and human economic interests in the age of capitalist extractivism.

But the elegant, sinuous movement of the trunks, which is reminiscent of a couple engaged in a dance, might also point in the direction of a more constructive connection between plants and humans. It could stand for the joint efforts of Krajcberg and a plant-turned-wood, who collaborated to create a sculpture denouncing environmental crimes that is, at the same time, a form of plant writing and inscription into human culture. The bond between the two trunks could even be interpreted as a representation of a future, harmonious and balanced way of humans and plants to live together. Phytography teaches us to see in plants signifying, intelligent beings with whom we share the planet. We simply need to learn how to read their embodied writing.

References

Karban, Richard. "The Language of Plant Communication (and How it Compares to Animal Communication)." In *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*, edited by Monica John Ryan and Patricia Vieira. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2017.

Saldanha, Paula and Roberto Werneck (dirs.). *Krajcberg: O Grito da Natureza*. RW Cine and TV Brasil, 2013.

Salles, Walter (dir.). *Krajcberg: O Poeta dos Vestígios*. Videofilmes and Rede Manchete, 1986.

Vieira, Patricia. "Phytographia: Literature as Plant Writing." *Environmental Philosophy*. 12.2 (2015).

