

*The Parliament of Plants
and other
Cautionary Tales,
Where Stories Make Worlds
and
Worlds Make Stories*

Céline Baumann in Conversation
with Ethel Baraona Pohl

In the midst of the European lockdown, »when the economic, political, environmental, and social climate often make us feel that the world is falling apart,« curator Ethel Baraona Pohl and landscape architect Céline Baumann wrote each other messages in which they address the notion of collaboration and what it means to »care with« instead of to »care for.« By revisiting Céline's work *Parliament of Plants* and the exhibition *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* at Matadero Madrid that Ethel curated, they argue that through observing the botanical world and its phenomena, we can learn a lot about interdependency, mesh networks, and contamination as tools to commonly inhabit and care with the world.

March 11, 2020

Turn now, beloved, your eyes to these blooming and colourful multitudes,
See how, perplexing no longer, they stir there in view of your soul!
Every plant announces, to you now, the laws eternal,
Every flower louder and louder is speaking with you.
—Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Dear Céline,

I would love to start this exchange about collective care by going back to your project *Queer Nature*, where you explore »the little known, disregarded, and rare intimate behavior of the botanical world.« What makes this project so interesting to me in this context – apart from being captivating per se – is that it can easily become a starting point for an extended understanding of how to live differently. To learn this seems to be more than a need in current times, when the economic, political, environmental, and social climate often make us feel that the world is falling apart; when the promises of any possible futures appear to be darkened by societal behavior based on individualism and selfishness, and thus, the urgency of focusing on other species, beings, and worlds.

That's why, when Maria Puig de la Bellacasa expresses that »Interdependency is not a contract, nor a moral ideal – it is a condition. Care is therefore concomitant to the continuation of life for many living beings in more than human entanglements – not forced upon them by a moral order, and not necessarily a rewarding obligation,« makes me think about how you describe the fluidity of behavior of the botanical world, and it drives my mind to think about how this behavior is also a condition that responds to the concepts of interdependency and care between plants, especially in the diversity of their gender expression, which you describe as enabling them to change and adapt in order to respond to factors like age, time of day, or environmental conditions. I guess it is exactly this diversity that allows them to take care of themselves, of other species, of the environment in general – and thus allows them to survive. Isn't survival the biggest challenge for any form of collective care?

At this point, I want to recall what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, that »staying alive – for every species – requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means

working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die.« When I put together these two references, it seems to me that interdependency couldn't exist without contamination, or that these two concepts can have more overlaps than we can initially understand.

This may be read as a provocation in a moment when the whole world is fearful of the word »contamination« due to the fast and wide expansion of COVID-19, but it is also true that language is something lively, always evolving and changing, and that we are in a constant search for new meanings to understand the word and therefore, the world.

So I think it's a good moment to ask you about your thoughts on these concepts of interdependency, contamination, and collective care in the framework of your research.

With warmest regards from windy Barcelona,
e.

March 17, 2020

Dear Ethel,

Talking about care is compelling today with the dire situation we are facing, as the COVID-19 pandemic is escalating, public life banned, and borders closing. In the confinement of my home I am looking at my botanical collection in hope to find some answers. Please let me send you a picture of my orchid, which is blooming at the moment.

The fierce aspect of its white flowers reminds me of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe. He knew how to picture the queerness of life, be it the crudeness of S&M games, the frailty of Patti Smith, or the eroticism of a tulip. His eyes were able to see the world as a web of relationships. It is actually what the *Queer Nature* project is investigating: how the diversity of the plant kingdom and its sexual expression highlights the entanglements within vegetal matter: hermaphroditic, male, female, sequential transsexual... . Botany straddles the line between categories we so painstakingly strive to define, in the quest of defining our own identity.



Blooming orchid

I also have these little cacti whose seeds I received from the Botanical Garden of Basel. Look how tiny they are! It would be easier to grow them from a cutting, and way faster. I wanted nevertheless to give those seeds a chance to express their genetic diversity instead of cloning an existing specimen.



Cacti seedlings

Here are some more of my houseplants, a little selection of exotic beauties that I call the »Theater of Plants.« They watch my sleep and are often the first beings I see while opening my eyes in the morning. I am sure that they care for me within my sleep. I believe that the world of plants can teach us a lot about the way we are interconnected to the world – if we deign to listen to it. If we only try to escape the urge of »caring for« nature – this charitable act implying the domination of the well-minded ecologist toward a weak and silent earth – but to learn how we can »care with.«



Theater of Plants

The »Theater of Plants« for instance gives me way more than I give it. In exchange of a bit of water, it provides daily oxygen, shapes, colors, and sometimes offers the spark of a bloom. It also brings me peace of mind, inspiration, and serenity. The interdependence is strong and my plants' contained generosity never ceases to impress me. Interdependency and contamination are key words at the moment, as our everyday life is drastically hindered, teaching us that care is contextual and response-ability cannot be standardized.

Now that Madrid is on lockdown, the theme of the show *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* – an exhibition not about what the city is, but about what it can be, resonates strangely. I would be interested to know how you reflect on that project within the current situation.

With my warmest regards from here, stay safe.

Céline

April 6, 2020

Dear Céline,

I hope you're doing well in this unprecedented situation. It has taken me awhile to get back to you, but I must tell you that the gesture of care that you had sending »a small garden« through the photos of your plants, while I'm under lockdown, has been highly appreciated and I have been coming back to this email more often than you imagine. Thank you so much.

In my opinion, the examples you sent accompanying the plants and how you pose the difference between caring *for* and caring *with*, are quite important at the moment we're living, not only related with the botanical world, but in the many ways we can inhabit the planet and relate to all other species that are part of it along with us humans, from the molecular to the cosmic, and all in between.

After receiving your email I have been thinking, reading, and reflecting a lot on your mentioning how Mapplethorpe saw the world as »a web of relationships,« in relation to the exhibition *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales*, an exhibition not about what the city is, but about what it can be, because I think they share a common and strong link. I guess that this is because a deep belief that the basis of any city can be described as well as a »web of relationships« – hence the relation with the exhibition – but can only be understood or disentangled using the appropriate narratives, those that can go beyond written or even spoken languages, but also can deal with our underlying ways to understand the world, including emotions, dreams, secrets. Here I want to recall this quote by Donna Haraway:

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

— Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

I really love how she ends stating that »it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.« This quote resonates loudly on all the twelve »cautionary tales« or fables that form this exhibition, and especially at the current moment, when many thinkers, theorists, practitioners are trying to understand how the configuration and the meaning of concepts like »urban,« »cityscape,« and »public space« are changing if we include new variables to take into account when talking about the city. How can we understand that web of relationships when social distance is imposed? How can the concepts of empathy, care, and affection coexist with fear, anxiety, and the unknown (and indeed we're witnessing that they coexist and feed each other)? The stories we use to talk about all these concerns are more important than ever, when the world is shifting and sometimes our conventional language is not enough, thus the idea of twelve different stories that can give us glimpses of the many possible cities that we can inhabit seems to be more than pertinent at the moment.

One point that can be highlighted from the exhibition in relation with the current situation of confinement and isolation around the world, is that it is not a set of twelve isolated stories, fables, or narratives. These twelve tales are interconnected, contaminate one another, thus enriching, changing, and affecting its neighbors, as we can see for example, between MAIO's fog of *The Grand Interior* getting into Clara Nubiola's *3 Wanders and 2 Strolls*; between your *Parliament of Plants* and Chloé Rutzerveld's *The Politics of Food*; or how Aristide Antonas's *Inverted Tents* contaminate by invading the aerial space of some other installations, just to mention a few:



MAIO's *The Grand Interior*, with the fog escaping the walls of its installation.



The Inverted Tents by Aristide Antonas, occupying the space above its neighboring installations.



Céline Baumann's *Parliament of Plants* visually contaminating Chloé Rutzerveld's *The Politics of Food* through the pink light of the growing lamps.

In light of this reflection, I want to end up by quoting Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and her thoughts about contamination, when she wrote »How does a gathering become a ›happening,‹ that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival.«

Even though, as the curator of the exhibition, it is difficult for me to be totally objective, but my feeling is exactly that as a whole, the *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* somehow are greater than a sum of its parts. And here I would love to stop and ask you to share your thoughts about how contamination takes place in the botanical world and if you agree that it can be a tool of survival. And if so, what can we learn from this web of relationships that happen in the world of plants that can be applied to the cities we live in?

Sending warm wishes from sunny albeit silent Barcelona,
e.

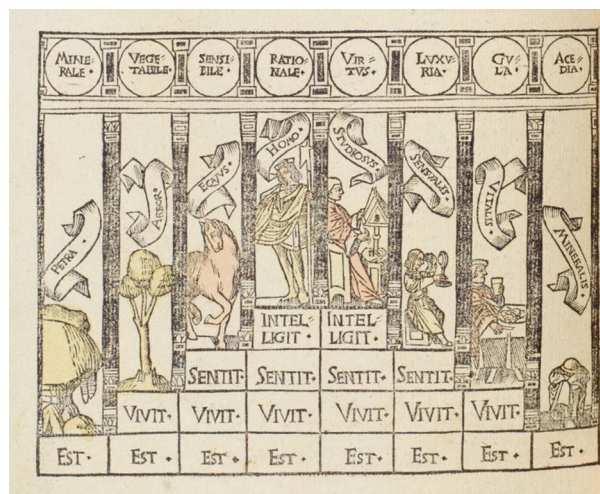
April 14, 2020

Dear Ethel,

Thank you for your words and images.

After having broken the earth by recklessly extracting its resources, we are now suffering directly from the outcome of our actions. The current contamination reminds us indeed bitterly that we are not lone individuals but rather part of a complex ecological community, intertwined with vegetal, animal, and mineral matter. The disruptions of fragile ecosystems and the pressure on wildlife territories pushed otherwise distant viral forms to come into narrow contact with our unprepared bodies.

Contamination is a form of contact amongst others, although a very harmful one, transforming the contaminated body into an impure, unsuitable, or sick being. Contact is thankfully not always harmful and the plant kingdom uses various forms of interaction, ranging from close embrace to deliberate avoidance, in order to communicate. I would like to discuss with you about how such more-than-human behavior might challenge an archetype stating that our current society is on top of the so-called evolutionary pyramid.



Pyramid of the Living, Charles de Bovelles, Liber de Sapiente in
Liber de intellectu, 510, p. 245, Düsseldorf Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek

The »Pyramid of the Living« from the sixteenth-century French philosopher Charles de Bovelles in his *Book of Wisdom* is a good example of a traditional human-centric idea of the world, in which beings are being divided between EST (is) for rocks, VIVIT (lives) for plants, SENTIT (feels) for animals and INTELIGIT (understands) for human.

Trees perceive one another and sometimes avoid physical contact: a phenomenon called »crown shyness« where trees conspicuously avoid touching each others' canopy. This is meant to let sunshine reach the forest ground and allow saplings to capture the necessary daylight vital for photosynthesis and growth. At a time when we are required to enforce social distancing measures, it is inspiring to realize plants also apply such mechanisms.

While forest protagonists avoid touching each other above ground, they have intense exchanges underground. Their root systems are connected thanks to a web of mycorrhizal fungi, allowing exchanges of water, carbon, nitrogen, minerals, and other nutrients between individual plants. This phenomenon is referred to as »wood wide web,« a term coined by the biologist and forest ecologist Suzanne Simard.

The two mechanisms of »crown shyness« and »wood wide web« demonstrate how vegetal matter uses assistance and self-restraint to care with and for each other. It leads me to consider seriously that flora not only »is« and »lives,« but also »feels« and »understands.« The pyramid of the living could be reconsidered today as a circle, a form without end neither beginning, where hierarchy is replaced by continuity.



Parliament of Plants, based on the original painting
The House of Commons by Karl Anton Hickel (1793–94)

I wish the extraordinary time we are experiencing now may inspire us to »refuse human exceptionalism« in the words of Donna Haraway, which I would like to illustrate with this image of the project *Parliament of Plants*. In this speculative world, flowers, grasses, and succulents replace politicians. I like to believe that if such a green democracy existed, it would more easily reach consensus, as its members would understand that their administration can only act toward the common good, basing their decisions on the principle of mutual care and support. The *Parliament of Plants* allows imagining an »otherwise,« in which as you beautifully mentioned in your previous quote of Haraway »stories make worlds, (...) worlds make stories.«

I send you my warmest greetings, dear Ethel, and I hope that despite closed borders we will have the chance to see each other sometime soon. I am looking forward to our next encounter.

Céline

April 16, 2020

Dear Céline,

Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this thoughtful exchange.

A very good friend of mine told me recently that she was thinking on the *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* exhibition, now that the tales are silently resting at Nave 16 in Matadero, and she was imagining *Parliament of Plants* taking over the exhibition space, growing up and suddenly occupying, invading, and contaminating (in the good sense of the word, à la Anna Tsing) all the other installations, in the simple but complex form of a jungle when it is being born. I simply loved that image, nature just naturally evolving, to take back its space in the city, or the other eleven cities, not in an architectural or planned way, like in parks or public spaces. Rather than that, in a natural, playful, and organic way, bringing the botanical and wild world into the many possible cities that inhabit the exhibition, from outer space to the domestic, from revolutions to the underground.

Perhaps after these days of confinement we will learn something, at last.

Much love from Barcelona,

e.

After the exhibition *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* at Matadero Madrid closed during the lockdown it reopened end of June, and will be on display until the end of January 2021.

Ethel Baraona Pohl. Critic, writer, and curator. Cofounder of the independent research studio and publishing house dpr-barcelona, which operates in the fields of architecture, political theory, and the social milieu. Editor of *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme* from 2011–16, her writing appears in *The Form of Form* (Lars Muller, 2016), *Together! The New Architecture of the Collective* (Ruby Press, 2017), *Architecture is All Over* (Columbia Books of Architecture, 2017), *Harvard Design Magazine*, and *Volume*, among others. Her curatorial practice includes the exhibitions *Adhocracy ATHENS* (Onassis Cultural Centre, 2015), winner of the ADI Culture Award 2016; and *Twelve Cautionary Urban Tales* (Matadero Madrid, 2020), among others. Since 2016, dpr-barcelona has been a platform member of Future Architecture.

Céline Baumann is a French landscape architect based in Basel, Switzerland. Her eponymous studio operates in the fields of urbanism, landscape architecture, and exhibition. 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. Her work on *Queer Nature* and *Parliament of Plants* has taken various forms: exhibition, garden walk, workshop, lecture, talk, or publication at institutions including the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the Matadero in Madrid, the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019, the National Gallery of Arts in Vilnius, the Museum of Architecture and Design of Ljubljana and the ETH in Zürich. Baumann is a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude.