

## VEGETATIVE PORTRAITS

### *The 'Antlitz' of the Plant in the Medium of Photography*

#### 1. What does the image of a plant reveal?

What does the image, the photograph of a plant reveal? Leaves, branches, green surfaces, flowers, fruits? What is the essence of a plant? Does it consist of these enumerated parts, or is a plant something that grows, i.e., carries out photosynthesis? What do we mean when we speak of plants? Flora or vegetation? If we look at Gino Bühler's photographs, we see sections of plants. These sections are of plants that exist in our urban environment: in parks, on the roadside, in botanical gardens. They are publicly accessible. And yet we usually overlook them. Bühler's photographs, however, are neither images that depict the plant in its environment nor botanical studies. They reveal something else. They make another aspect, namely the *Antlitz* (face) of these plants, visible. They are portraits of unnoticed creatures that share our more or less everyday living space, mostly as ornamental plants to decorate our cities without attracting attention.

The photos depict *Rhus typhina* (staghorn sumac), *Hosta Old Faithful* (funkia), *Matteuccia struthiopteris* (ostrich fern), *Thuja plicata* (western redcedar), *Thuja occidentalis* (eastern white-cedar), *Coleus scutellarioides* (painted nettle), *Heuchera micrantha* 'Peach Flambé' (coral bells), *Platyclusus orientalis* (Oriental thuja), *Polypodiales Pteridium* (spotted fern), *Bergenia spec.* (*Bergenia*, spring bloomer), and *Armoracia rusticana* (horseradish) – what is the history of these plants?

The staghorn sumac – originally from North America – has lived in Europe since 1620 and, in autumn, turns from yellow to orange to crimson. The *Hosta Old Faithful* (funkia) originates from Japan but got its names from a German and an Austrian botanist.<sup>1</sup> The ostrich fern is European. The western redcedar and the eastern white cedar come from North America and Asia. The painted nettle, cultivated since 1851, is found wild only in subtropical and tropical Asia and in northern Australia. The 'Peach Flambé' originates from Central and North America. *Bergenia* come from Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Himalayas, Russia, and China. In contrast, the spotted fern is native but poisonous and is characterised by a rhizomatic root system, unlike horseradish, which is known as a useful plant in Europe. Most plants have been 'imported', and their names thus refer to the lively trade, colonialism, and exoticism of European cities.

Most of the time, we are unfamiliar with either the botanical or the common names. Whereas the botanical names serve to classify and categorise the plants, the common names refer to their usefulness or striking features. Do the names say something about their essence? The direct encounter with these plants, which are not individuals in the classical sense,<sup>2</sup> opens up the literary space of narratives. Each of these plant communities has a biography, although it is to be asked whether *bios* (Gr. βίος) or *zoe* (Gr. ζωή), the distinction between qualitative and bare life, is not to be negotiated here. According to Aristotle, plants are living *things* because they ostensibly have no perception of the external world.<sup>3</sup> This leads to the question: Can one write about the life of plants? Do they have biographies? Or are they not rather

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<sup>1</sup> Named after Heinrich Christian Funck (1771–1839) and Nicolaus Thomas Host (1761–1834).

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Die Intelligenz der Pflanzen* (Munich 2015), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle: 'On the Soul' [Lat. *De Anima*], trans. John Alexander Smith, in: *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross, vol. III (Oxford 1931).

*phytographies* (from the Gr. *φυτόν* for ‘plant’ and *γράφειν* for ‘to write’)?<sup>4</sup> Because, in the case of plants, life and light are conditions, biographies of plants could also be called photographs. The life of plants can be translated less into words than into photos.

The ‘plant’ is more than its (visible) parts but is also not subject to an idea of the ‘plant’ that transcends these. It is always only an empty signifier, a sign that can be filled with ‘plants’ (now in the plural). This is why Bühler photographs not only one and the same plant, but different ones: different in species and genus, reproduction, growth, and spread. The botanical categories are subverted just as much as the aesthetic ones. The empty signifier ‘plant’ eludes us on the level of meaning, only to become all the more exhausted on the level of the image, the visual.

Which plants are seen in detail and how they are depicted depends on epistemological and aesthetic settings.<sup>5</sup> Whereas botanical literature uses images to illustrate knowledge about plants,<sup>6</sup> plants in paintings tend to symbolise something.<sup>7</sup> Illustrations in herbaria, botanical encyclopaedias, and publications in Western European modernism actually seem to make plants visible.<sup>8</sup> With the medium of photography, however, this epistemic visualisation changes decisively. Knowledge becomes objective through technology:<sup>9</sup> The acting human subject recedes into the background to reveal what it (the plant, for example) is ‘actually’ like. In botanical contexts, photography depicts a plant directly, without the artistic creative power of a subject. At the same time, however, photography has also developed its own forms of aesthetic expression. There is no photography that does not also possess subjective humanity.

The tension becomes palpable: What images of plants reveal depends on their contextualisation in epistemic or aesthetic contexts. Claude Monet’s famous water lilies do not depict these plants as one would find them in botanical treatises – namely in their phases of development, in cross-section, or as an ideal image of the plant species outside its natural habitat – but rather the pictures present a specific phenomenological perception of the water lily, which we commonly describe as ‘Impressionistic’.<sup>10</sup> Andy Warhol’s *Flowers* from 1964 presents a different view of plants: the commodification of the symbol of beauty, its repetitiveness, without any botanical or cultural knowledge. Georgia O’Keeffe’s early flower paintings were interpreted from a Freudian perspective, and thus sexualised, by male contemporaries. This has a long tradition: The founding father of botany, Carl von Linné, was the first to articulate the sexuality of plants.<sup>11</sup> But his way of presenting this was provocative, almost pornographic. According to Linné, there are promiscuous plants, marital beds, changing partnerships, multiple partnerships, etc. The sexuality of plants also plays a role in the work of the amateur botanists Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: It is not without reason that Goethe explained his botanical principle of metamorphosis to a young woman in the elegy ‘The Metamorphosis of Plants’ – an early case of ‘mansplaining’.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Ryan, ‘Writing the Lives of Plants. Phytography and the Botanical Imagination’, in: *Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> See: Giovanni Aloï, ‘Introduction. Why look at Plants?’, in: idem, *Why look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art* (Leiden and London 2019), pp. 14ff.

<sup>6</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objektivität* (Frankfurt am Main 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Carol Armstrong, ‘Cameraless. From Natural Illustrations and Nature Prints to Manual and Photogenic Drawings and Other Botanographs’, in: idem and Catherine de Zegher (eds.), *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature* (Princeton 2004), pp. 87–165.

<sup>8</sup> Aloï 2019 (see note 5), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 24; Daston/Galison 2007 (see note 6).

<sup>10</sup> See: Aloï 2019 (see note 5), p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> See: Carl von Linné, *Praeludia sponsaliorum plantarum* (1730); idem, *Systema naturae* (Leiden 1735).

O’Keeffe is all about seeing, as she said herself: ‘One rarely takes the time to really see a flower. I have painted it big enough so that others would see what I would see.’<sup>12</sup> So, why do we look at plants? Alluding to John Berger’s famous essay, ‘Why look at Animals?’, the art historian Giovanni Aloï asks this very question. The question can be sharpened to the examples given: Do these images depict plants at all? Or do they only visualise the respective discursive view of plants articulated in artistic processes, i.e., the subjective view of a human being?

According to Aloï, plants are often only the background against which people define themselves and their difference to nature, as well as their culture.<sup>13</sup> We often perceive plants more as resources and as a medium instead of understanding them as something genuinely alive.<sup>14</sup> Our relationship to plants is thus characterised by their disposability.<sup>15</sup> This is especially true for cut flowers. The pragmatic, capitalist framework, as Aloï writes, determines our perspective on plants. And although we have been trained in social discourses that vegetation is fragile and to be preserved, we are nevertheless struck by a specific ‘plant blindness’ that allows us to understand plants, as in the case of O’Keeffe’s contemporaries, only within cultural schemata.<sup>16</sup> These cultural schemata have limited our view of plants. Plants are seen – as with Aristotle – as being rather passive and mute, have no consciousness, and are unable to communicate. However, the latest research shows that plants can communicate with each other and even alert other species such as insects to danger and ask for help.<sup>17</sup> They hear, smell, feel and see.<sup>18</sup>

Aloï thus argues for an altered way of seeing that allows us to perceive plants as an integral part of our environment. What and how we see constitutes an alternative seeing<sup>19</sup> of ‘the Other’, and Bühler’s images attempt to reconfigure our habits of seeing.

## 2. Gino Bühler’s *Lichtperspektive*

One of the most important inspirations for Bühler’s work is Karl Blossfeldt’s *Urformen der Kunst* from 1928. However, if one looks at the photographs reproduced in the publication, a difference becomes clear. Blossfeldt, with a botanical eye, was interested in the plant not as a living being but rather as a form. Whereas, in 1807, Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland had presented seventeen different forms, silhouettes, in their *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, which painters should adopt in order to be able to depict the jungle accurately and as ‘natural paintings’,<sup>20</sup> in Blossfeldt’s work, this categorisation as

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<sup>12</sup> This early quote from 1926 has become a common thread in O’Keeffe’s art and life.

<sup>13</sup> Giovanni Aloï (ed.), *Botanical Speculations. Plants in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, UK 2018), p. XXIII.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXIX.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Aloï 2019 (see note 5), p. ##.

<sup>17</sup> Mancuso/Viola 2015 (see note 2), pp. 96ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49ff.

<sup>19</sup> Aloï 2019 (see note 5), p. ##.: ‘At stake is the opportunity to understand plants as integral, coexisting actants that play defining roles in the functioning of ecosystems on this planet. What we look at, and how we look, constitute essential parameters in the recuperation of “alternative gazes” and the crafting of new ones – modalities of engagement that entail more than the ocular – modalities that can lead to a reontologization of the living.’

<sup>20</sup> Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen : nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer : auf Beobachtungen und Messungen gegründet, welche vom 10ten Grade nördlicher bis zum 10ten Grade südlicher Breite, in den Jahren 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802 und 1803 angestellt worden sind* (Tübingen 1807), p 25 [translated].

functionalisation diffuses into an abundance of individual forms. In his review of the book, Walter Benjamin wrote, quoting the Bauhaus pioneer László Moholy-Nagy:

‘He [Blossfeldt] has proven how right the pioneer of the new light-image, Maholy-Nagy, is when he said: “The limits of photography cannot be determined. Everything is so new here that even the search leads to creative results. Technology is, of course, the pathbreaker here. It is not the person ignorant of writing but the one ignorant of photography who will be the illiterate of the future.”’<sup>21</sup>

And Bühler is, of course, not illiterate in photography, but neither is he one who takes everything literally. Blossfeldt’s ‘vegetal “forms of style”’, as Benjamin calls them, are enlargements, while Bühler’s pictures are portraits. Where Blossfeldt and Benjamin hail Goethe’s paradigm – metamorphosis – that is, plants transforming before one’s eyes into other forms, columns, and dancers, in Bühler’s work we see the untranslatable *Antlitz* of the plant.

Bühler’s pictures thus play with Roland Barthes’s categories of *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium*, Barthes writes, ‘is inevitably to encounter the photographer’s intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them.’<sup>22</sup> This is the case when we consider the pictures as images of plants, which are meant to show us a botanical plant. The *Antlitz*, however, is more; hence the *punctum* that ‘shoots out of it [the scene] like an arrow [...]. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).’<sup>23</sup>

There are two things that are striking: first, the small details in the pictures, the impurities, which, as an accidental moment, turn the pictures into riddles. And second, it is the idea that the plants look at us without ‘eyes’. The *Antlitz* of these plants questions us and our seeing. The randomness of details – here a snail, there withered clusters of fruit, blossoms, or dead leaves, white bird droppings on a green leaf, falling needles of other surrounding plants – breaks the formal coherence of repeated leaves. Seen from a distance, the picture has the rhythm of seriality. The portrait is uniform, ornamental. But each leaf is different, does not conform to the repetitiveness of aesthetic ideas, but rather deconstructs the uniform recurrence of the same form as a living practice.

In his book *How Forests Think*, the ethnologist Eduardo Kohn propagates thinking in images.<sup>24</sup> We look at animals and plants because, in this way, we can understand something about what reaches beyond us humans: His ethnological observation makes use of various imaging techniques, from hallucination to photography. In this way, Kohn opens up an experiential horizon for cognition that is broader than socio-cultural or positivist explanations of reality. The forest points to a ‘beyond’, something external to humankind, through the various images we make for ourselves – in stories, photographs, drawings, scientific data.<sup>25</sup> The medium and practice of photography as image-making with light, as well as the technical apparatus, thus become a mode of making a reality visible that is not only the reality of the human gaze.

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘News about Flowers’, in: idem, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 2008), pp. 271–273, here pp. 271f.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* [1980], trans. Richard Howard (London 2000), pp. 27f.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 26f.

<sup>24</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think. Towards an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 2013), p. 222.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 222–224.

Bühler call this *Lichtperspektive* (light perspective). He positions the camera in this perspective as a 'via-à-vis' of the plant. This is because the plant is always already looking, orienting itself towards the most efficient light yield. Plants see their via-à-vis, if this means recognising light intensity and forms.<sup>26</sup> Bühler follows this mutual orientation with his camera and thus makes the *Antlitz* of the plants visible, which presents itself in the spirit of an economy of light. Without an economy of light, there is no photosynthesis. Plants align themselves against the light in such a way that their parts position themselves efficiently for growth and survival. They occupy space and constitute a surface. In this way, the plant and the camera traverse the light space on a central axis. The *inclined gaze* along the '*Lichtperspektive*' finds and recognises the *Antlitz* of the plant.<sup>27</sup> It introduces itself and enters into a dialogue with the camera. The portrait is the result of this dialogue of inclined seeing. For Bühler, this seeing is a touching without touching. It allows the repeated contemplation of the *Antlitz* and the practising of the inclined gaze.

'The Other' presents itself in the *Antlitz*, as Emmanuel Lévinas writes.<sup>28</sup> But the plant is the 'more-than-the-Other' in cultural history, and it is also evolutionarily different.<sup>29</sup> Plants are structured differently from animals and humans, who have visually distinguishable body parts, a face with two eyes and ears, for example.<sup>30</sup> These features, or so we have learned socio-culturally, allow us to recognise animals as individuals by means of their 'faces'. The human face serves as a starting point: 'A face says at a glance who you are dealing with, but it says it in such a way that it is difficult to put it into statements, and it still says something different than you can put into statements.'<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, plants are physically and genetically closely related to us.<sup>32</sup> This radical similarity in difference is what makes plants and thus their *Antlitz* so special. Photographing plants under the sign of the portrait transforms the vis-à-vis into 'the Other'.<sup>33</sup> The portrait allows us to 'overlook' the differences. The inclined gaze overlooks the difference. Because plants are constructed serially,<sup>34</sup> they appear individual in a different way. They present their *Antlitz* through a multiplicity that is aligned together towards the light, but is unique. Their *Antlitz* is due to their positive phototrophy, that is to say, their surface, which is oriented towards the light. The phototropism of the plant,<sup>35</sup> the movement towards the light, is based on its ability to see. The plant looks first. It is always already looking at us.

The plant and the photograph store the same position of the sun. And what the plant converts into sugar, the camera transforms into a printable image of the plant's portrait. Chemical processes thus determine the analogue image formation of the *Antlitz* along the *Lichtperspektive* and with the economy of light.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf.: Mancuso/Viola 2015 (see note 2), p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> The *Antlitz* belongs neither to the image nor to the viewer. Cf.: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalität und Endlichkeit. Versuch über Exteriorität* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1987), p. 283: The *Antlitz* 'calls upon me, it speaks to me', writes Lévinas, thus giving it a medial quality. [translated]

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>29</sup> Mancuso/Viola 2015 (see note 2), pp. 32f.

<sup>30</sup> Cf.: Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 369–418; Martin Bartelmus, 'Im Antlitz der Tiere lesen', in: Vittoria Borsò, Sieglinde Borvitz, and Luca Vigliani, *Physiognomien des Lebens. Physiognomik im Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Biopolitik und Ästhetik* (Berlin and Boston 2020), pp. 91–110.

<sup>31</sup> Werner Stegmaier, 'Die Zeit und die Schrift', in: *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1996, pp. 3–24, here p. 7 [translated].

<sup>32</sup> Mancuso/Viola 2015 (see note 2), p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> Stegmaier 1996 (see note 31), p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> See: Mancuso/Viola 2015 (see note 2), p. 38: 'Plants consist of repetitive modules' [translated].

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50f.

In this particular case, exposure is not only a question of time in terms of shutter speed. Bühler sets up the camera in meteorologically favourable conditions in the early morning. Direct sunlight and direct solar irradiation must be avoided. The pictures are taken between night and day, in the twilight before sunrise or when the cloud cover is as closed as possible, with an exposure time of one to four seconds. The aim is to achieve a soft play of shadows when photographing, but one that encompasses the entire light spectrum. The transitions from 'very dark' to 'very light' never become 'hard' and thus allow the substance of the image (colour, form, space, detail) to stand out.

Central to this is the focusing screen of the large-format camera SINAR 8x10 inch. With this, the camera's position and orientation for the image can be determined. It serves as a movable 'canvas'. This is moved as often as necessary until the lens and light axis are in the *Lichtperspektive* of the plant. This technical movement takes place protected from light under a camera cloth.

Light quality and quantity play a decisive role for both the plant and the camera. For the camera, light quality and quantity determine the duration of the shutter speed. In contrast, plants naturally move along the light. This movement, however, is so slow compared to human movement that the camera can be adjusted to it. Both – the plant and the camera – encounter each other in a movement that is slowed down for humans (as the nomadic animal),<sup>36</sup> immobilised as it were.

Vilém Flusser explained that we should watch a time-lapse film if we wish to take the perspective of the plants:<sup>37</sup> 'Strange', he continued, 'that not even the most radical of ecologists try to take the point of view of the plant. They do not let the plants have their say either but talk about them the way humans talk.'<sup>38</sup> Bühler's plant portraits reveal not only what Flusser calls the 'essence (the "eidos") of plant life', but also the non-essential, the *Antlitz* – it is precisely this non-being of the plant that connects a 'vegetarian thinking'<sup>39</sup> with the thinking of 'the Other'. While the former, as Flusser writes, brings us 'distance from ourselves', the *Antlitz* forces us to question our habits of seeing.

Whereas Flusser aims at the 'logos', at the communication between humans and plants,<sup>40</sup> Bühler's photographs aim at seeing, i.e., the inclined gaze. We do not talk to plants, Flusser says, because they 'talk' to us too slowly, whereby growth is understood as communication. The same applies to the image. We do not see the plant growing; it grows too slowly for the picture. But this is precisely why the photograph is exact. It is exact in its slowing down of the slow to a standstill so that the plant portrait can appear. People and animals do not hold still for the *Antlitz*, plants do.

Thus, the photographs have an inherent vitality that is specifically vegetative. The photographs play with the anthropocentric idea of inanimate nature as an immobile plant world. But the photographed plant is in motion. It shares the perspective of light as the line and axis of this movement with the camera. But this movement is not simply a movement towards the sun. This Hegelian paradigm, that all living things turn their heads towards the

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Marder, 'Anti-Nomad', in: *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 10, no. 14, 2016, pp. 496–503.

<sup>37</sup> Vilém Flusser, 'Vom Pflanzenreich', in: Karola Bloch (ed.), *Spuren – Zeitschrift für Kunst und Gesellschaft*, no. 21, 1987, pp. 5–6, here p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. [translated].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. [translated].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

sun,<sup>41</sup> is what Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray called philosophical-masculine heliocentrism and heliotropism.<sup>42</sup>

Bühler's photographs do not show the inclination to lean towards the sun or, analogous to the human head, inflorescences (flower heads), but rather vegetative surfaces that deconstruct the seriality of the ornament through their diversity. The images do not depict repeating leaves, but rather a multiplicity of leaves and needles in different positions that follow the economy of light, but not a capitalist logic of maximised efficiency. On the contrary, we see leaves that take on other functions; we see a social, communicative plant surface, and thus an image with its own depth.

Bühler's method is at odds with the heliocentric ideology of idealistic philosophy and aesthetics. Light maximisation is not the goal, nor is a hierarchical orientation towards the sun. Not the sun as a fixed point, but rather the diffusion and spreading of light make the picture. The distribution of light instead of the concentration of light makes the difference, not only phototechnically but also phenomenologically: Where the sun would shine directly, nothing would be visible. The gain in knowledge of heliocentrism is at stake. Bühler counters this with an aesthetics of the *Lichtperspektive* that seeks a dialogue instead of a monologue. And this is because plants are never just one (in the sense of an individual), nor is the light here to be understood as a single ray of light. In contrast, the sun is the sign of the absolute, the one. The plant is the multitude.

### 3. The Image as a Portrait

Bühler is also concerned with '*Augen-Licht*' (eyesight; or, directly translated: 'eye-light'), which he relates to the vegetative, the technological, and the 'humanimal'. 'Seeing' occurs three times in different ways: As the seeing of the camera, the plant, and the human being. All three 'ways of seeing' are dependent on light. Since Plato, light has been the prerequisite for everything that exists.<sup>43</sup> Together with line and surface, light constitutes a 'there is'.<sup>44</sup>

Such a 'there is' is called *Antlitz* and the other, the vis-`-vis (not 'the Other') presents itself in the portrait. But these portraits have no centre. The plants radiate in a double sense: once materially physically as growth (also temporally and spatially beyond the image) and once in the sense of the economy of light as a negative to the incident rays of light. What the camera is for the plants, the plant is for the light – its negative to the matching positive. And us? We take the position of the main light and the camera in order to be seen by the plant. Bühler puts us in the position of exchanging glances with the plant. We have to allow ourselves to be looked at, just as we look at the plant.

A voyeuristic male, scientific, and objectifying 'gaze' recedes.<sup>45</sup> Instead, Bühler enables us to encounter the gaze of plants. It is precisely this ecological perspective that also makes the

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<sup>41</sup> See: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 'Naturphilosophie', in: idem, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundriss*, [Werke, vol. IX], ed. Eva Moldenhauer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979), p. 411; cf.: Michael Marder, 'Vegetal Anti-Metaphysics, Learning from Plants', in: *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 44, 2011, pp. 469–489, here p. 475.

<sup>42</sup> The sun generates the metaphysics of occidental philosophy. See, for example: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edition (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997), pp. 91ff. Furthermore, Luce Irigaray criticises 'heliocentrism as a male fantasy of being able to give birth to oneself': Luce Irigaray, *Speculum. Spiegel des anderen Geschlechts* (Frankfurt am Main 1980) [translated]. See also: Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau Ponty* (London and New York 1998), p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> See: Lévinas 1987 (see note 27), p. 271.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 272 [translated].

<sup>45</sup> Aloï 2019 (see note 5), p. 33.

images political in their aesthetics. They are about a non-exploitative economy, the economy of light, and an aesthetic that is not inscribed with the retouched face of advertising, but rather with the diversity of the non-face: In the sense of Lévinas, the selfie is replaced by the *Antlitz* of 'the Other', as an ethical call to face the gaze of the non-human inhabitants of this planet.

Jeremy Bentham's famous question, 'Can they suffer?', the fundamental basis of animal ethics, did not lead to the *Antlitz* of the animal in the debate between Derrida and Lévinas.<sup>46</sup> Lévinas simply does not answer whether animals can have an *Antlitz*. Accordingly, the *Antlitz* of plants seems even more improbable, because they are exempt from the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'.<sup>47</sup> On the individual level, the 'killability' of plant life does not seem to play a role; in an ecological dimension, however, it does. If plants constitute our habitat, if they can live without us, but we cannot live without them, then an ethical conception of plants is needed. Looking at them, encountering them as counterparts/as 'others', opens up the possibility of ecological response-ability.<sup>48</sup>

The recognition of the plant requires new ways of seeing. How can environmental aesthetics be rethought?<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek radically formulates that we should finally bid farewell to the romanticisation of nature in order to realise that even an ecological perspective on nature, on plants, only ever serves an anthropocentrism.<sup>50</sup>

Bühler's photographs, however, in their relation between technology and the vegetal, which are intertwined in the practice of photosynthesis, are not beautiful green pictures, but reveal in the portrait of the plant its 'plant-being'. The depiction reminds us of ways of life that are slow, responsive, decentralised, and diverse. At the same time, contemplating these images allows us to become plants ourselves. In the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, becoming a plant does not mean indulging in a mimetic game, but rather understanding and possibly adapting the ways of life of plants, thus participating in this slow, responsive, decentralised, diverse way of life with its own economy, perception, subjectivity, and identity.

What is more: With Aloï, one could also speak of a politicisation through the plant following this aesthetic plant-becoming of the viewer; for plants are agents of political resistance that are characterised by their strength, resistance, and adaptability, whereas our capitalist postmodernity represents the exact opposite.<sup>51</sup> Aloï targets the genuine anti-capitalist way of life of the plant. In this way, the *Antlitz* of the plant also deconstructs the narcissistic concept of the portrait, which is intended to depict mostly human subjects in their full bloom.

Furthermore, plants are not simply pictorial subjects in the sense that they epistemically illustrate knowledge, aesthetically produce the beautiful, or activate the sublime. They are neither merely form of sustenance, nor merely aesthetic pleasure,<sup>52</sup> but rather entities whose stubbornness is not exhausted in the forms of art and consumption made for humans.

Do plants transcend human concepts of image, portrait, and aesthetic pleasure because they are 'the Other'? It is not the image but the plant that is transcendent. It is not the image that transcends our perception – the plant does so because its perception is different as a result of the *Lichtperspektive*. The image becomes the plane of immanence for the essence of the plant. The image thus mediates between transcendence and immanence, between the levels

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<sup>46</sup> Derrida 2002 (see note 30), pp. 400ff.

<sup>47</sup> Cf.: *ibid.*, p. 416.

<sup>48</sup> See: Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham 2016), pp. 34 and 58. 49 Cf.: Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York 2018).

<sup>50</sup> See: Slavoj Žižek, 'Ecology without Nature', conference at the University of Athens, 2007; *idem*, 'Ecology. A New Opium for the Masses', Jack Tilton Gallery, New York, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Aloï 2018 (see note 13), pp. XXXIff.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXXIII.

of perception of humans and plants. Only an *inclined gaze* opens up a politicised perception of the plant, a transcendental contemplation in the sign of an ecology and in the context of a vegetative solidarity with plants.

And this solidarity is expressed where, in the *Lichtperspektive*, the *Antlitz* of the plant is coupled with the technical apparatus and the human gaze, and they form a community. The gaze is no longer a powerful, all-seeing, and identifying gaze. On the contrary, it is guided by the perspective of the plant. And because the plants are always many and not just one, the selection of the image detail is not an intervention in the sense of a sovereign gesture by the artist's hand, but rather an engagement with the deconstruction of the serial gaze, which only ever sees the same thing repeated or at most a repetitive pattern.

The leaves and needles are, however, not a pattern, but rather singularities that, together, constitute another form of identity, of society, which today are also the subject of plant sociology. The image detail now no longer cuts or crops. The act of photographing adapts the gestures of a gardener and thus acquires the connotation of a concern for the plant. The gardener prunes because he or she cares for the plant. Likewise, Bühler cares for the plant when he chooses the image detail.

In the sense of Derrida's *passe-partout*, it is only through the plant as the subject to be portrayed that the image detail and the frame acquire a new content. The image detail and thus also the selection of the image detail are in tension with the portrait and the *Antlitz* of the plant. Cutting out, selecting, and framing only seem to limit the plant.

Plants are always already on this side and on the other side of the image. They form surfaces, which in turn have depths, and depths, which in turn form surfaces. Choosing a detail then no longer means cropping what is to be seen, because even plants that have been cut do not suddenly lose their plant-ness.<sup>53</sup> They remain this or that plant, even if they have been cut beyond recognition. Bühler's images are, however, not cuttings; they are removed from the practice of floristic cutting and pruning. Bühler only crops the technical image, while the plant continues to grow in the imagination, at the edge of the *passe-partout*.

The truth of the plant lies on this side as well as on the other side of the image. Does this make the image detail irrelevant? Does it matter which detail Bühler presents? Yes and no. Yes, because the *Lichtperspektive* reveals the *Antlitz* of the plant, and as soon as the camera assumes this angle, the image also reveals the *Antlitz* of the plant. No, because the detail is for the viewer and not for the plant: The framing makes the plant-ness accessible to us. Photography shows its strongest side here, as a practice of making 'the Other' accessible and not just visible. The shaman, it is said, constitutes his or her subjectivity with the help of plants. And because these green creatures made this planet habitable for us in the first place, we should also orient our subjectivity towards them and become a bit like the plants that we look at all too rarely.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 38: Some plants can do without 90 to 95 per cent of their components and develop completely from tiny remnants.