

RAINA SPIRITS

contemporary art talk

A Plant as Familiar: The Use of Plants in Contemporary Art

By Faye Kahn

7 May 2013



LFT: Carson Fisk-Vittori , Untitled (Gerber) (2011), Little Paper Planes Gallery

RT: Ikebana Arrangement, Yasuhito Sasaki (2010), Ikenobo Society of Floral Art, Kyoto

Contemporary society occurs within a system of objects: toasters, cars, latch hooks, extension cords, hair pins, keys, cards, bunk beds, and so on. It is this very system (see also: pile, archive, collection, etc.) that contemporary artists have assimilated & reappropriated as a catalogue of their raw material. In a statement from Cincinnati's U-turn Art Space's 2010 "Stuff Art" group show of contemporary assemblage artists, an uncredited author defines the tactic as follows:

"These artists use spatial relationships and juxtaposition to increase our awareness of the common by approaching a free-for-all of range of materials as freed form ... The evolution of these art practices is also in dialogue with "truth to

materials” philosophies that began in the International Style of Modernist architecture...”²

Not only through Modernist Architecture but more popularly recognized at the advent of the readymade by Duchamp in 1917 & carrying through such evolutionary checkpoints as Andy Warhol’s Brillo boxes, Mike Kelly’s stuffed animal agglomerations, the Etsy object sculptures of Brad Troemel, & the composited image collages of dump.fm users. The assemblage artist today is in an active & influential position, albeit one that pushes objects across the gallery floor, cutouts across the photocopier bed, & gifs around the checkerboard transparency field rather than paint across a canvas.

If this is the language in which we are speaking now, a lexicon containing stuffed animals, sign-my-guestbook gifs, Vitamin water, urinals, emoticons, taxidermy, etc. etc. & onward into infinity, it is worth noting the popularity of the term “plant” or “houseplant” & occasionally “office plant” which can be found repeatedly throughout digital & physical gallery dialogue.

The houseplant’s original intention was for the interior decorator, whose profession hinges on the art of arrangement. Houseplants usually function as decoration in the home to soften our transition from nature to domestic space. It freshens the air, appeals to our aesthetic senses, & reminds us of idealized places we aren’t (outside). This relationship to interior decorating is recognized by many plant-wielding artists, including & exemplified by Claire Fontaine in her Interior Design for Bastards show (2009) whose statement immediately admits its awareness of “[t]he close and ambiguous relationship between art and decoration.”³

In a matryoshka-like way, the art of arrangement is repeated on a smaller scale within the houseplant’s own container, & even institutionalized by the practice in Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. According to the Ikebana International website, “In principle, ikebana aims not at bringing a finite piece of nature into the house, but rather at suggesting the whole of nature, by creating a link between the indoors and the outdoors.”⁴ Assemblage artist **Carson Fisk-Vittori** discusses her Ikebana-like exploration of this link in a 2011 interview with Claudine Ise of contemporary art blog Bad at Sports:

“...a soda can thrown in a flower pot is a gesture, because it is intentionally placed whether or not the person was aware of it... It’s really a natural gesture, like eating a cherry and spitting out the core, but in our world we are dealing with these man-made objects that are specially designed and branded. The contrast of man-made object and plant life really shows how far away we are from living with nature. I basically started looking closer at these casual arrangements and creating my own with elements of plants and man-made objects...I view these arrangements as microcosms for our relationship with nature.”⁵

This approach also addresses the current heightened cultural awareness of environmental issues, which has pushed plants into the socio-political spotlight that provides the creative fodder of cultural critics & artists. There is also an undeniable escapist aspect of the houseplant, as it is kept inside as a reminder of the outside, natural world. This adds to the plant’s ability to represent tropical & indigenous cultures that have more intimate relationships with nature.

However prescient these decorative & potentially escapist implications of plants, they cannot completely explain their rise in popularity in contemporary art. Though these qualities may influence the artist's decisions on a conscious level, the houseplant has taken on more complex implications than a simple symbol of nature. Through its living presence & familiarity, it has transitioned into a subject that can go as far as acting as a stand in for a human being.

The movement of the plant from the exterior natural space to the interior gallery necessarily devolves the specimen into the tamed version of itself: a house plant. Consequently, this conversion is also the first step in transforming the creature into an entity better capable of relating to humans. Unlike other found props from the system of objects catalogue, a plant is living & needs to be maintained-a quality uniquely expeditious in its importance to living things (in fact the lifespan of the plant determines the duration of visual moments in the work in which it resides). Furthermore, in many cases the plants in use occupy space in an analogous way to how a person would, with similar height & life presence. In an article discussing the sculptural work of Claes Oldenburg, Julian Rose describes the effective use of scale in relation to the minimalist work of Tony Smith:

"The primary objective in scaling the work roughly to the human body was to establish a connection between viewer & object. Objects that are too small or too large...tend to isolate themselves from the observer. A small object is perceived all at once, in a glance; it demands no participation. A similar problem arises with much larger objects, which are unintelligible at a short distance and fully legible only from distances so great that the viewer no longer feels that he or she is sharing space with it. A human-sized sculpture, neither too small nor too large, invites the viewer to move around it, gaining a full understanding through exploration of a shared space."⁶

Coming upon a plant in a gallery space has a similar effect, if not more pronounced with the added dimension of life. In fact, this dimension & our a priori participatory relationship with plants lessens the problem of the small object Rose describes; we are accustomed to getting close to small plants to take care of them which extends our personal, shared space relationship with them.

Plants serve as a unique stand-in for a person because they have no emotive face. The exploitation of emotion & drama through pop culture, capitalism, & consumer arts has caused passion to become a subject that borders on guaranteed cliché & is territory that must be broached with extreme caution & tact. Plants therefore have a heightened utility to the artist as a subject more ambiguous than a portrait, mannequin, or cartoon character. Domesticated houseplants appear innocent, attractive, & defenseless, making them sympathetic individuals, while not fostering any theatrics or relying on sonic communication as an animal does. As a result of this, installations including plants do not always necessarily feel softened by the presence of plant life but can in fact occasionally alienate the viewer as though she were walking into a room of emotionless people. Still, they are more responsive & decisive than a mineral & their anthropomorphic qualities are obscure enough to free us from any social judgment of character from either subject or object.

This anthropomorphic phenomenon in the fine art world can be exemplified by a blog post found on the Walker Art Center website written by gallery photographer Gene

Pittman. In the post, Pittman discusses archival photos from the center pre-1971, a time when plants were commonplace in the museum & gallery setting performing a decorative role:

"In these images [plants] seem to act as the stand-ins for the patrons, sometimes aloof and in the background or congregating around the radiator as if in discussion. And then there are those that are really into the work, standing in front of a sculpture's light, their shadows enveloping the work."⁷

Following the text there is an extensive image collection featuring examples of the gallery patron plant in its natural habitat. Looking at these photos today out of context, one might easily confuse them for photos of a contemporary exhibition incorporating plants in an installation. Compare, for example, the following two images:



Untitled archival photo from the Walker Art Center taken by in house photographer Gene Pittman



Parrots (installation view), Jacopo Miliari (2008), Frutta Gallery

The top image, from 1959 at the Walker Art Center & the bottom from Jacopo Miliani's 2008 installation *Parrots* at the Frutta gallery in Rome. Both situations involve tall, frond bearing plants observing framed 2D artwork hung on nearby walls with no obvious distinguishing feature illuminating the arranger's identity as artist, as in Miliani's installation, or as interior decorator, as in Pittman's archival photo.

A similar effect is achieved by the Tumblr hosted image collection *Mise en Green* assembled by Brooklyn based curator, exhibition producer, and writer Arden Sherman (www.miseengreen.com) that intuitively documents the plant's evolution from decorative gallery constituent to chosen member of the art piece. Amongst archival museum & gallery photos like those described above appear photos from contemporary gallery shows without any obvious distinguishing feature. For example, a long cluster of potted greens from the *Dormitorio Publico* 2012 show at the Campoli Presti Gallery can be found between archival photos from the Guggenheim & the MoMA in the 1950s. A selection of hanging & floor-dwelling plants in ceramic containers at Paul Wacker's *Wait & Watch a While Go By* show at the Alice Gallery in Brussels (also from 2012) is displayed unobtrusively between documentation of the MoMA & Manchester Art Galleries from the 70s & 80s.

Viewing the plant as a human stand in allows us to obtain a more insightful reading of contemporary artworks that utilize them. *Wait & Watch a While Go By* now appears to reference what the group of hanging & potted plants in the exhibit are doing. The gallery is hung with paintings by Wacker & Maya Hayuk done in an unpretentious graphic style, many of which include images of wild plants & houseplants alike. The resulting situation is one of a kind of plant hangout- a place for them to relax & enjoy each others company with pictures of family members decking the halls.

Although this anthropomorphization goes largely unrecognized (at least publicly) by the artists that implement it, at the beginning of his 2008 performance piece *Este Cuerpo Que Me Ocupa*, João Fiadero directly confronts us with an unadorned plant as subject:

"...Fiadero walks into the stage coming from the audience, crosses it, opens a door on the back wall, and brings in a tall plant in a vase. With care, he lays the vase down on the stage floor and returns to his place among the audience. At the center of the stage, the plant executes a beautiful solo with living creature, inert matter, and imperceptible motions."⁸

In this example, a potted plant takes on the role of the choreographed dancer. The rest of the performance introduces a cast of other domestic objects (mostly furniture) and a few people, but the first physically present subject is a plant. In internal activity it is between a human and a non-living object. It is transitional, a pathway between identification from a person to a thing.

Buffalo based artist Ethan Breckenridge places his plant subjects in undersized transparent prisms & cubes that emphasize the plant as a sympathetic creature. In his *Too Soon* installations in Bolivia (2009) & New York (2010), potted plants are crammed into carpeted cubes. The viewer empathizes with the plants, leaves pressed uncomfortably against the walls of the cube, & we may reflect upon our own domesticated & carpeted glass cubes. Breckenridge more specifically articulates the relationship between human & plant in *Plants Have No Backs* (2008)- another plant (or two in some iterations) in carpeted windowed structure- but this time furnished with a

folding chair. The title & the presence of the chair immediately allow the viewer to compare herself to a plant, in particularly those in front of her, humanoid in height. Without any need to sit down or rest its non-existent back, the chair remains empty. If a person were to sit in the chair, she would be in intimate conversation with the plant. One wall of the box is constructed out of a mirrored surface depicting infinite clones of plants with unoccupied chairs. The plant stands tall & unaffected, neither suffering nor lavishing its solitary existence.

In tandem with the plant in the gallery space, the proliferation of the houseplant in artistic practice continues in the internet medium- work that is without 3D physical manifestation. In particularly in the work of younger artists on social communities like dump.fm & the TightArtistNetGang, found plant imagery is common in the composited moments that function as their incessantly morphing artistic economy. The plant's ubiquity here probably has more to do with the large quantity of plant based gifs & clipart used in early web design (much of contemporary net art aesthetics is based in early web/PC nostalgia) than with an anthropomorphic presence. Because web design began by imitating tactile textures, objects & actions in order to make itself more user friendly, it is for the same aesthetic reasons that appears in interior decoration that it finds its way onto the web as design elements. Furthermore, net art of this kind, which seems to seek to create a surreal version of the physical world, would be incomplete without common objects & textures, making plants an obvious & indispensable tool. Like in physical presence, plants here too remind us of an exotic outside world, or, in the case of a potted plant, the physical world immediately outside of the computer.

There are examples of plants in net art at every turn, but 24 year old net artist Douglas Schatz (dump.fm username guccisoflosy), who repeatedly incorporates plant imagery in his work, summarized the trend in posting an animated gif of a potted plant against a grey checkerboard transparency background above the text "Digital Office Plants Are the New Aesthetic."⁹

Unfortunately there is not enough room here to document a full up-to-date survey of contemporary artwork utilizing houseplants, but perhaps acknowledging this mania will allow us to look at this work with added dimension & intellect, rather than relegating it to simple appropriation. Surely plants will continue to aesthetically enchant all kinds of humans until further notice. Worldwide ethnic traditions document the symbolic meanings of various species, but the houseplant as readymade has mobilized the plant image into the 21st century. It has matured out of trite decorative & expired folkloric identities into advanced contemporary symbolic territory. Although the houseplant's current definition is unstable (as anything contemporaneous), its qualities as an emotionally ambiguous living subject that is aesthetically pleasing make it a versatile object that will continue to take on meaning as its use continues.

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Sources

1. I would like to thank all of the are.na users that helped me compile examples used in & as reference for this essay, in particularly Karly Wildenhaus, Dena Yago, Laurel Schwulst, Carson Salter, Greg Fong, Damon Zucconi, Charles Broskoski, & Bryce Wilner. Since the completion of this article the channel has remained active & can be seen here after logging in: <http://are.na/house-plants-in-contemporary-art>
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