

⁵Milou Wansink

*The leaf in the weave has
a row of thorny teeth*

Windowsill Plants

And there I am, in my attic room with a window too large for the grey sky, but far too small for all my plants, fighting for a glimmer of light, writing my essay, one of the last remaining tasks of my study, again a phase of my life closing. Similar to the flower as it closes its leaves towards new developments. Outside my room, it is a turbulent world, war and conflicts are everywhere and millions of people are on the run. There is also another war going on: modern societies are destroying nature, they take more natural resources than the world can reproduce, industrial activities and intense traffic do change the climate. Many news items are about the effects of climate change.

I think a lot about the “forces and energies,” which are contained within plants and flowers, and about the spiritual potential of the plant. Why would a plant or flower not have an emotional feeling of its own? A good friend of mine can hear a plant ‘scream’ when they get little or no water, as happened in a restaurant that she was visiting. I also sometimes see, when I walk the streets, occasional windowsills with “suffering” plants; you can see that they are ‘crying’. I have to suppress the tendency to press the doorbell. I hope that my work will function as a doorbell, making people aware of the nature around them.

The relationship with the plant has always been there in my life. My relationship has deepened as my research and investigation progresses; an evolution like the germination of a seed and its development and growth into a plant, a talking plant. Sometimes, I experience the signs and cries the “windowsill plants” want us to see and hear, they become weaker and weaker as they lose their strength and spirit. I notice the trees alongside the highway, the ‘highwaytrees’ (“grotewegbomen”), separated from their brothers and sisters by a main road and forever in the odor and particulate matter spat out by passing traffic. A living plant feels; can be unhappy; but cannot flee from her situation. But there is hope: even under the most difficult conditions, the plant adapts and continues to draw attention and demonstrate how beautiful the world is.

But my window is too small, my room too sealed from the outside world. I prefer to listen to the cry of the trees, bushes and plants. I want to stand up and ask for attention for the windowsill plants and highwaytrees that suffer from pain, and to make everyone aware of the beauty, the economic value, and most importantly, the essential function of the green world for human life.

Not any plant is without motion, all growth is a sequence of movements; plants are constantly bending, turning and trembling in their desire to support their relatively heavy steel.¹

We use the leaves, roots, bark and stems of plants and trees as food or medicine. The flower represents a special stage in the life cycle of the plant, demonstrating her individuality and giving expression to her splendid and essential vitality. You may wonder why the flower possesses such a magnificent variety of colors, shapes, structures, attractants and odors. The flower of the plant is the beautiful outcome of the plant, her ultimate result in the housing of seeds to be sure of propagation. I believe that the flower not only plays a vital role (physical expression) in the breeding of the plant, but the flower is also the creative expression of the ‘soul of nature’.

¹ France, Raoul Heinrich -1874-1943- In 1906 begon France aan het achtdeelige monumentale werk *The Life of Plants* waarvan de vier eerste delen -1906-1910- door hem zelf geschreven zijn. In 1922 publiceerde hij een versie over de aarde, in een boekje *Das Leben im Akkerbodem, Life in the Soil*.

Identity of nature

In browsing through the literature describing and explaining the evolution and the life of the plant, and paying special attention to the emotional and spiritual aspects, I noticed that for a long time plants were considered to have no consciousness and no self-determination.

In evaluating plants, Schopenhauer saw the perpetual recurrence of a restless and unconscious urge to execute (in a completely mechanic sort of way) all phases of their life process and life cycles. For me, this urge and activity of the plants is very exciting, and not much different than the behavior of human beings, and with more intelligence than Schopenhauer assumed. The plant has been looked at and evaluated from a human perspective and feeling. Ton Lemaire (1941-)² in his book ‘Verre Velden’ therefore warns of anthropomorphisation and anthropocentrism, precisely because man defined the plant from the perspective of human and animal qualities and abilities. The plant seems only to deal with nutrition, growth, and reproduction, and then to fade, in order to repeat the whole process.

Even without consciousness, the plant clearly possesses ‘the phenomenon of expression’ and a certain ‘embodiment of her inner states.’³ We can easily notice if houseplants are well looked after, but the question is whether it is just a matter of enough water, light and nutrition, or is there is more to be answered?

In the sixties, CIA agent Cleve Backster, started an experiment in which he noticed and validated the feelings and emotions of the Plant. In fact he was inspired by the work of Jagadish Chandra Bose. Backster connected plants to a lie detector, while he held a burning match under their leaves or cut their leaves. The lie detectors measured the same patterns and fluctuations as those measured when people were in stressful situations. Although plants are without central nerve systems, nowadays we know that plants react to light, temperature, scents and touch. Plants can feel pain, are sensitive to music and respond to the way people treat them. Plants seem to communicate with each other and react less passively to their environment than people think. Do plants have an aura or charisma? A private atmosphere around them? Is it justified to interpret the plants as phenomena, without asking yourself whether they really exist?

Vilém Flusser in his collected essays “Natural; Mind“ describes the phenomenon of ‘expression’. He writes:

A curious fact: trees are almost invisible. Every attempt to contemplate them proves it. There is a dense, multilayered fog between the one who contemplates and the tree. ... There’s something that’s mysterious because it is nebulous. ... To be sure, trees are partially invisible for, shall we say, physical and biological reasons, as their largest part is buried under the ground. Such a mundane and apparently obvious fact tends to be forgotten, however, by many of the thinkers that take trees as structural models (trees are in fact the preferential model)⁴

You might think that Flusser considers the tree as a phenomenon, the phenomenon of expression and embodiment of its inner states. In the way he looks at trees, the tree demonstrates its inner feeling.

² Lemaire, Ton -1941- *Verre Velden; Essays en Excursies*. 1995-2012

³ Scheler, Max Ferdinand -1874-1928- vooral bekend om zijn werk *In de Fenomologie en de Wijsgerige Antropologie*

⁴ Flusser, Vilhelm -1920-1991- uit de essays *Natural;Mind, Naturale Mente*

Due to the very large variety in the manifestations and lifestyles of plants, it is difficult for us to understand and interpret the 'expression' or outside look of the plant. It takes a lot of patience, expression, attention, and above all love, in order to even somewhat understand the plant. I write with empathy about the plant, for in my handling of plants I give and receive love.

Living plants in motion

Plants move their bodies as freely and gracefully as the most agile people or animals. The only reason that we, as humans, do not see it, is that the plants do so at a much slower pace than men. Raoul France writes,

*The roots of plants dig themselves looking for a way into the ground, buds and twigs turning and rotating in certain circles, branches, leaves and blossoms tremble and react on changes in their environment, tendrils circle around and stretch ghostly arms to feel what surrounds them. People only think that plants are immobile and numb, because they don't take the time and effort to look at plants closely enough.*⁵

Worm-like rootlets, which Darwin compared with the appearance of brains, constantly dig downward into the earth, with thin white threads, absorbing water and minerals, during their journey. With their small hollow chambers, in which ball starch may rattle, the root tips follow the direction determined by the forces of gravity. If the soil is dry, the roots move towards moister ground. Their forces can be so strong that they even find their way into pipelines and are powerful enough to cleave concrete.

Pat, dance, get stuck, stand still, twist and shout, find new paths and roads, become stronger and weaker. For sure I will transport water and plant seeds, there has to be a reason why I am wind. Again "weather" will live. I know that the seed pods that I pick up and take someplace else shoot and create new life, as a servant and not as a God. But I am not easy: I rub, beat, am hard and icy cold, quench, heat and burn, cool, cut, slide, do melt. I can create symbiosis, reflect anger, bring satisfaction, make fatigue, change mood, surprise, bring creativity, innovative, be hypnotic, surprise in illuminating, and aggravating, delivering of scents and freshness. The sun is my friend, I act as her servant and she rewards me with keeping me busy.*

Is the plant capable to plan and see its growth path and make changes to cope with changing circumstances? Or is it more a feeling? I do not think that the plant is a robot in a mechanical or electrical way. Plants are able to act purposefully; they may stretch themselves to directions and places they like or in a mystical way follow paths we can't understand. Plants that behave so confidently, so differently, and so responsively to the outside world need to have some means of communicating with each other and this outside world, similar to, or even better than our human senses. Plants register and take

⁵ France, Raoul Heinrich -1874-1943- In 1906 begon France aan het achtdeelige monumentale werk *The Life of Plants* waarvan de vier eerste delen -1906-1910- door hem zelf geschreven zijn. In 1922 publiceerde hij een versie over de aarde, in een boekje *Das Leben im Akkerbodem, Life in the Soil*.

* Notes of my own green thoughts

in ongoing events and phenomena, where man — caught as he is in his people-centric view of the world subjectively revealed to him by his five senses — knows nothing about them. The entire plant world lives in response to the movement of the Earth and its satellite, the moon, and to movements of other the planets of our solar system. Perhaps it will one day be demonstrated that the plant world is also under the influence of the stars and other celestial bodies in the universe.⁶

The Plant Legs

And why does the flower of the plant have such an impact on our emotional lives? In the Eastern spiritual tradition, the lotus, which rises from the mud to thrive in pink splendor, is a symbol of spiritual unfolding. This view of the unfolding of the plant is similar to the cycle of human life: birth, growth, adulthood, fertility, insemination, parenthood, wisdom and spirituality, old age and death, under any circumstances whatsoever. Why am I so fascinated by the life of plants underground? I can spend hours looking at the roots of fallen trees and I am fascinated by my rooting home plants and the development and growth, in water, of the root structures of my plant cuttings. Roots that weave in an erratic behavior, tortuous, like daily life, with her curves and obstacles. The idea that there, below the ground, an enormous network of root structures exists and flourish, has a great impact on my thinking and my work. Everywhere in the world, stringy roots are active in building and maintaining a complex and interactive web of natural foundations and roads. This web is referred to as the rhizome. The legs of the plant or tree, as part of the rhizome, are underground, which one cannot see.⁷

Tearing out a plant does not bother the rhizome, which will grow and develop further, without having a strategy or a plan or individual preferences. It is just there, the one rhizome connected with the other, combined and connected in a dynamic way covering most parts of the earth. Is the rhizome not an analogy for our worldwide internet, whereby everybody and everything is connected?

Deva

In my work I am entangled in an interactive process with nature, absorbing its ever changing expression and constant motion. I walk around and come across biological material and watch and meet plants. During these encounters, a concept for my work emerges. I try to tune into the plant, to enter into a kind of pre-relationship and then select a few for my work later, and, while doing so, absorb the energy and the essence of the plant. After that, a period of review and investigations commences. In this important period, I undergo a complex inner process where I have to handle my encounter with the plant, an "exchange of souls". I compare it with entering into a true-relationship with somebody, which will be present in my work. The specific quality of such a relationship is the result of an interaction between the plant and me. You catch it, if it were, the Deva, the essence of the plant living further in my work. Deva, the collective noun for all supernatural beings like fairies, angels, elves, goblins, sylphs, gods, devils and a lot of other creatures. Raoul France stated, and I agree with him, that plants originate from Devas. We humans are creatures that are not separated from nature, but we are part of and communicate with the living sphere.⁸

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⁷ Flusser, Vilhelm -1920-1991- uit de essays *Natural: Mind, Naturale Mente*

⁸ Bose, Sir Jagadish Chandra -1858-1937- *Response of the Living and Non-living*. 1902

When I travel to warm countries I always bring with me a bigger suitcase, with my tools, the shear, my garden gloves, twine and a large hessian bag, because I know that in my return to home, I will bring back meaningful parts of plants and other natural materials. When picking and selecting plant material, I will never damage the roots, so the plant will grow further and stronger. Sometimes, when I cycle to school, with bags full with plants and branches, I most certainly look like a living and moving bouquet myself!

Prickly Spine

Trees and plants cannot just run away from danger. Therefore, I became interested in how plants protect themselves. Plants have several defense mechanisms to protect themselves from their enemies, like insects, birds and herbivores. Most of the defense mechanisms are based on physical hurdles and toxic substances and gasses. But for many plants and trees there is a painful dilemma: they often need insects, birds and also mammals for their fertilization and reproduction. Rejection and attraction is a complex dimension of plant life.

The spine in any form whatsoever, is the main subject in my collection; from the great spine of the Acacia to the knits and spines of the wild rose. Spines and thorns function to repel the enemy, they prick, and may act as nail guns, which go off if you get too close. Prick protective fabrics with crochet hooks. Sometimes a plant's defense involves clever tactics. For example, the large hollow spines of the Acacia *Collinsii* provide shelter to ants, which in return protect the plant against herbivores.⁹

Frequently it happens that my legs and feet are stuck into the ground. "Look, my legs penetrate into the ground; my toes spread and put little footsteps in the underground!" I anchor my nails to 'kleiige rotsen' (clayish rocks). 'Rotsnagelsporen' (rock-nail traces) are engraved and form paths for the underground water that flows around in the dark and moist land. 'Hooroverdekking' (the cover by horn) covering, protecting, an instrument of my foot, acts as large spines that I embrace because they assist me in digging, sticking and clinching. 'Hoorhaar' (the baby hair of horn) gives me warmth and a fuzzy feeling while my 'plantfeet' dig further into the earth. My horns are black from Earth, and thus I leave black traces and black spots behinds. Sometimes I wear my sandals of tree bark or leather to protect myself from the chilly wind and weather. Dancing leaves, love, swaying branches, the color green superior, branches that want to embrace me, bushes like cheerful curly hair, you know that they hear and feel me.*

Thorny Cactus

In general one finds the cactus to be an extraordinary and somewhat weird plant; the combination of the shape, color, thorns and sometimes-beautiful flowers distinguish the cactus from most plants. When they are without bloom, most people don't pay attention to them. However, there is a growing number of aficionados who appreciate the variety in shapes and different characteristics they have, they differ in the same way that humans differ from each other. When I look at a collection of different cactuses it is as if they begin to speak, each in its own language, by shape, growth, habit, spines and color. While looking, I become overwhelmed by a swarm of phenomena of colors and shapes, as in a kaleidoscope, and in front of all their performances it is easy to get confused. We cannot understand their sense of direction and their growth path and are afraid to touch the prickly creatures.

How strange and wonderful and misunderstood the cactus may be in its stolidity, intransigence, its threat and menace, her peace and her resignation or somber fury, it leaves no one indifferent, who is absorbed in this plant species. Maybe we recognize our struggles with and dealings in our life. Also we, in our sometimes strange manifestations and wonderful wear, our costumes and outfits, are often misunderstood in our pathos and intransigence, as we experience our own threats and menaces, and in calm and resignation, face the grim, dreary and complex environment around us.

In order to deal with the harsh conditions of nature, we know that the spine was once a blade that slowly transformed into a spine. When looking at the spine, do we experience the spine's memory of a time when the spine was still a plant leaf? Like an older person thinking of his youth?

Such a gray hairy cactus, such a stately Torch Cactus, such a characteristic Disk cactus and thorny Cactus Ball: What spines! As hard as horn, as sharp as needles. Ouch, you prick me! You need to know how to deal with them. Like the beekeeper and his bees, the gardener with his roses, and the man with his human friends. For they are in principal not unfriendly, they sting only if you incorrectly handle them. It is not so different from how people must behave in dealing with each other.

The pointy spine (in my work) is like an outstretched hand with nails, which is being given and that you take in a certain way, as an analogy for making contact in real life. Avoiding painful encounters, but also like the hooking of the spine as the comforting hand that takes you further in our chaotic life. The stimulus that shakes you, reminds, revealing your own irritability, sometimes as if stung by a wasp. The deep puncture of the stabbing in the side after a bit of running, the sting of a burr until the blood flows, pain.

Devilish spines, sawing rosebud, intrigued crop, eggs with eyes, choking nostrils, war loving berries squirt ink, dripping from their corners of the mouth, chewed roots, shooting balls of goo, fires its sticky balls with a motorized and electrified intensity, red teeth, an awl to bite through the plant, the tips of the plant as instrument to nibble. If you turn around the plant a body appears, the root has the appearance of a certain hairstyle, stem or trunk and branches as his limbs.

The leaves and flowers seek rapprochement, like fingers that want to grasp something, guided by the pulse of the open and close. To assimilate and to swallow.*

Clematis is the thread of the devil, linaria is his ribbon, nettles are his darning needle and indigo is his paint. Tritoma with his brilliant red blossom is his poker. Ground ivy and houseleek are his chandeliers and the mandragora officinarium is his candle. His snuffbox is the puffball. Spotted dead nettle is his apron, the ipomoea cairica is his garter and he polishes his boots with mulberries.¹⁰

Clean Cut

I often take some equipment and tools with me when I commute, travel, or just walk or bike around. I am always searching for natural material, which I can use for my work. I never forget my gloves, because you have to be careful. And I think: you can also better approach most people with gloves on! And what is stuck to the plant, I cut with scissors, to minimize the damage, a 'clean cut', bringing clarity! An item sought among man: clarity. A growing young plant needs, just like children, the support of sturdy branches, in its urge to find as much light as possible, or to find safety and security. Every plant has instruments and weapons to protect itself, just as man has his weapons and armies. I sometimes wonder, whether, and in what way, humans have copied certain properties of the plant. When we talk about the spines it is a clear reference to plants. How did the term spine become integrated in our language so often and in so many ways? All kinds of expressions and sayings are derived from words and language related to plants. And not only words and phrases, the look of some objects are derived from the spine: The 'punk movement' was pronounced prickly, with spiky studs, pins, points and spiked hair. The plant has the spine for protection, for the 'punker' spines had a more aggressive purpose, a kind of weapon, a symbol of resistance against the establishment.

Green Coat, a chain of growths

In my work I want to realize a connection between textiles and plants. To show the beauty of the plants, but certainly also to create awareness in the observer of the beauty and importance of nature. Without green plants, humans could neither breathe nor eat. At the bottom of each leaf are many motile stomata in the process of devouring carbon dioxide and emitting oxygen. Actually, the green shell of the world is active every day in the marvelous process of photosynthesis, the production of oxygen and food for humans and animals. Most of what we eat during our lives is based on plants, which compose matter out of air and earth, by means of the sun. The other parts of our diet, composed of animal products and by-products, in turn, are derived from plants. All food, all drinks, intoxicants, drugs and medicines, which feed animals and keep us alive, when used in the right way, we owe to the action of photosynthesis. Sugar gives us starches, fats, oils, waxes and cellulose. Man is dependent on cellulose as a raw material for his shelter, clothing, fuel, fibers, basketry, cordage, musical instruments, and the paper on which he writes his thoughts.

Excitation and connection through the combination of the Rhizome and Spines

During my youth plants and nature surrounded me. I was very conscious of the effects the seasons had on the plants but also on animals and on people. The flowers and the bees, the joy when it becomes spring, the sometimes-present gloom during the dark days. I burned my fingers not only at the stove, but I also poked my finger on challenging and beautiful cactuses standing on the windowsill of my room. At that time, I did not know the meaning of words or expressions like 'interaction' or 'connectivity', but I had a kind of feeling that I could communicate with plants and strangely enough I experienced that one way or the other they communicated with me! In my adolescent years, my clothing choice was also determined by the natural patterns and colors around me. My empathy towards nature is expressed in my fashion design, textiles and work. The reasons for this drive were, and still are, difficult to explain. Which phenomena do I want to demonstrate? Nature itself? Or did, and do I, have other reasons that I want to explain and communicate through my textiles and work? By now I realize the complexity of our society. Part of modern mankind is detached from nature, or is even capable of destroying nature. This is even more remarkable since we, from a historic perspective, have only known much more about the origin of life and the dynamic processes behind it for a short time.

More and more I am convinced that I, subconsciously, want to a statement in my work: *Humanity can learn from Nature because it is part of Nature!*

My work is inspired by the rhizome and root systems of trees and plants, the shooting, the rooting, the studying, working with materials, growing, weaving, interweaving, burying, shrinking, drying, giving water: they are like my children.

In my work I use a lot of organic material derived from root systems. But to attract attention I also go back to my childhood: I make use of cactuses and their spines. Not only to demonstrate the beauty of nature and how nature protects itself, but on occasion, to bring a little pain to the careless spectator to raise awareness of the statements I want to make. However, to compensate for possible pain, I often make often use of sheep's wool. This material has a protective function in a friendly dimension, and demonstrates clearly the interaction between nature and people.

There is an interesting relationship between the wool, the process in which fleece becomes wool, the plant, the spine, a living system, textile, wool textile, wool and lint from the plant, transporting seeds, providing protection and comfort, hairy as an agreement with flora, fauna and the wild man.

The wind ripped the curls off my head. My torso is firmly rooted in the soil beneath, in the dark earth. My branches are the spines of my hair growing out of my head. In autumn the wind blows through my hair, as a present and preparation for the winter, I let my leaves free to travel with the wind. A happy feeling, a fresh air sends my hair dancing dance, and me smiling. The wind shakes me awake but is sometimes too noisy, and the wind's force makes me feel as though my arms and legs are torn. I let my environment know by rustling and whistling with my branches and leaves.

In autumn my hair has a 'tie-dye' feeling caused by all the colors it becomes and drugged by the odors the change brings. Swinging and whispering. A whirlpool of salmon pink, light brown, dark brown, ocher yellow, warm orange, I swirl around in my own whirlwind. I fear the natural forces, I am curious and look for the mystery and longing for some different dimension that I am not capable to comprehend. I only can grow toward the sun, where my light and heat is coming from. Maybe I am overconfident in my pursuit to become larger, and growing upwards and growing downwards, grasp deeper with my roots and nails, glue and clinch myself to something else, and arrange for scales and spines to create fear. I feel that there are others around me, in spite of having my spines, I dance with my upper body. I entice with my flowers, blossom and scents.*

Nature is a precursor of and analogous to the Internet. Both in its form and in its function. The worm shaped root-structures and Rhizome network of plants and trees are similar to all the wires, data-cables and connection points that are essential for the functioning of the Internet. The function of both is to connect and to inter-react, to grow as a whole without a clearly defined purpose. It is all about the system and not so much about the individual. Seen from an individual perspective, these kinds of networks seems very complex and one might easily get the feeling of being lost in all this connectivity.

At first, unconsciously, I started to work as the traditional craftsman works, in weaving and knitting my work, combining textiles with plant materials, both dead and (in to an decreasing extent) alive. In my knitting and weaving work, materials are hooked to one another. I combine and integrate hard and woody parts from roots, stems, and twigs, with soft, downy textiles and wool. Resembling a complex network, but also a showing of robustness in combination with warmth and comfort. In addition, I use needles, thorns, and spines. These are meant to attract the attention of my spectator, to excite and to hurt. To connect the spectator with nature and natural protection. I hope that the combination of perception and feeling (hurting) cause the spectator to think. Most humans express their thoughts in words. In the Dutch language many words and metaphors are derived from natural objects, manifestations, and phenomena. This is certainly true for the spine of a cactus. "De draak steken met iemand" (stabbing the dragon with something = making fun of someone); "een hart onder de riem steken" (stabbing a heart under someone's belt = giving someone support); "ergens een stokje voor steken" (to stab a stick before something = to prevent something from happening). The spine, that pricks, which shakes you awake, which makes you think. The spine, which hooks onto you, which hangs for a while, like some relationships in and out of your life. But in the end I hope that the viewer of my work will be influenced by the beautiful colors and patterns of the material and the composition. My role is that of a butterfly that brings attention to the plant, by letting her grow in my knitted fabrics and woven fabrics, as the start of a second life.

The ends of my plant legs are my hooves, or my nails as tips of my furry whorls and wisps that I throw up against the walls to climb and to clinch with something. I climb to the sun and to the soggy aloft surrounding my nipples and my tipping points sparkle in the sun. Spines cover as a pan lid of plant pots and my leaves as roof tiles, which reflect the light like jumping and gouging dancers, keeping me cool and humid. My hooves are less severe at the end of my arms or branches, free gravity will automatically bend my arms downward. If they stand out too much I will be stuck or nailed down. If hooves transform and my nails become icicles I know winter has come. I then sharpen and harden my armor and clinch further in the ice. Underground anchors the plant and the tree further and above they dance in the wind with their bodies. The visible and the invisible. Above and below. Just as we as humans let our bodies dance with movements in squiggles, circles and stringy wisps, like snakes fed by sometimes impulsive and unexpected energies, the same as the plant does. The rhizome, invisible and underground. The lotus flower, above ground, visible, with an amazing appearance and the ultimate expression of beauty but also a symbol for the wonderful network that nature encompasses. A manifestation of vitality and energy. The aboveground cannot exist without the underground and vice versa, just like the human inner and outer, the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown.*