

From undead commodities to lively labourers: (re)valuing vegetal life, reclaiming the power to design-with plants

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Concepts of “gestion différenciée”, “gestion harmonique” and “zéro phyto”ⁱ are ubiquitous in Francophone urban green space management. Sparked by changes in legislation, innovations in landscape architecture, and the diversification and intensification of park usages, all insist on the need to let go of dominant “horticultural” approaches to urban parks, and instead experiment with “rural”, “wasteland”, or “wild” aesthetics and forms of “ecological” management.ⁱⁱ They involve both new ways of *designing* vegetal landscapes and of engaging with the spatialities and temporalities of plant life in everyday *maintenance* work. In this essay, I draw on research conducted in Geneva (Switzerland) to examine the forms of enrolment of plant life that respectively undergird the horticultural and ecological traditions of urban greening. I argue that they constitute two singularly distinct modes of valuation of plant life, the former predicated upon displaying *undead* vegetal commodities, the latter upon putting to work plants that are *lively* and capable. I discuss how value is ascribed to plant life, who has the power to do so, and, using two examples, argue that ecological *convivial experiments* should be conceived as a reclamation of the *power to design-with* plants, against the horticultural industry’s hold on the variety, forms, and modalities of vegetal life in cities.

Within the horticultural paradigm, urban greenery is predominantly designed as a *still life*ⁱⁱⁱ, with annual and biannual flowers among its most important features. Purchased by green space services from horticultural firms in various stages of their life (from seedling to adult plant), these are watered, fed, repotted, re-repotted, and trimmed, until they reach their adult stage. At that point, referred to as “finished” or “completed” plants, they can be transferred outside of the polytunnel, and into their final destination: a flowerbed. Gardeners leave enough room around each individual plant for a final spur of growth, after which, the design is considered complete. Henceforth, flowers are expected to stay in the same stable state the whole season

through, before being uprooted, composted, and replaced with new, and just as still, flowers, at the start of the next season. A green space manager details the design principles of such flowerbeds: “We would create grids, so we would make lines, and plant 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6, then the next line we plant 3-4-5-6, 3-4-5-6, 3-4-5-6, and so on, so we would get a bed with structure, with volumes and depths”. These horticultural compositions evidently leave little room for agency, spontaneity, or dynamism. Instead, they draw on a conception of plants as strokes of colour in a pictorial composition. Such an approach to greening equally relies on a dichotomy between these desired, stable, horticultural commodities and less-desirable, proliferating “weeds”. Producing these compositions as stable requires intensive (human) labour, to keep plants alive (watering and feeding them), and remove dead ones as well as all undesirable organisms (“weeds” and parasites).

“Ecological” approaches, on the other hand, are predicated upon nurturing the lively character and capacities of plants in order to diversify the species composition and aesthetic quality of urban green spaces. Within such approaches, wildflower and grassy meadows, live hedges, and beds of perennial flowers abound, most of which require little to no watering, less mowing/trimming, and fewer interventions overall. Detailing this approach, a member of the direction of Geneva’s green space service explains: “time has come to stop using flabby plants”. Increasingly, as he suggests, the heretofore highly appreciated horticultural plants are seen as lacking vitality. Their stability, and the human and environmental resources required to produce it, are not fit for purpose at a time of legal restrictions over the use of chemical phytosanitary products and decrease of public resources and workforce. In lieu of them, grassy, perennial and spontaneous plants, seen as more lively, are being newly valued.

Perennial plants, gardeners explain, have the capacity to survive the passing of seasons. They display more liveliness, they expand, in sometimes surprising ways. New design and maintenance practices engage with these characters: “We used to plant flowers in lines, with specific distances”, a gardener explains, but “now lines are over: we had to change our mental programme”. In flowerbeds, evolving plant structures increasingly replace the rigid lines and compositions of horticultural design. They rely on associating the varied modalities of growth of different types of plants –e.g. perennials, grasses, and annuals– and the complementarities of their behaviours, and observing, understanding, and nurturing their interactions. When “it happen[s] that a plant take[s] over another one, that some plants di[e] asphyxiated”, gardeners “let them do, and [...] wait to see what happens”.

As for “weeds”, “if we call them spontaneous plants, we can rethink how we live with them”, a gardener tells me; and a large-scale convivial experiment in Geneva’s cemeteries forcefully illustrates it. In 2010, the City of Geneva’s 25 hectares of cemeteries, whose grounds were heretofore mostly covered with gravel, were transferred from the funerals to the parks service. The latter decided to green them, so that more park-like maintenance could be adopted. A botanical survey undertaken as part of the planning process revealed that an endangered variety of lichen –*Placidium squamulosum*– was thriving in one of the cemeteries. The report recommended that the greening be made compatible with the preservation of lichen life, in particular that no soil be added, or gravel removed. Greening in the gravel and without threatening lichen life, what a challenge, for a horticultural profession which associates greening with sowing lawns, equates *good* soils with *rich* soils, and categorises moss and lichens as unpleasant at best. Forced to respond creatively, the service studied the spontaneous flora that was growing in the more remote, and less maintained, areas of cemeteries. Based on these observations, it designed a mix of species deemed able to green the cemetery while respecting lichen life. The mix included many of the species thus far deemed undesirable – among which *Achillea millefolium*, *Leontodon hispidus*, and *Plantago media*. In lieu, therefore, of established approaches to greening, which require removing the gravel, adding top soil, and sowing a lawn, the protection of a somewhat uncharismatic organism – a lichen – opened the way to working with the very “weeds” which had been fought against through decades of maintenance. The total cost of sowing hectares of such mix, however, proved too high, and this provocative project was dropped. Instead, some areas were indeed seeded with an equivalent mix, while in most others, maintenance of the gravel was put to an end, and, instead of being sown, the desired spontaneous grasses and flowers were allowed to reclaim surfaces – at their own pace. In areas which were seeded, the mix includes “fast-growing, ground-covering perennials” and “some lawn for social acceptability”, which will occupy space while dormant seeds sprout and spontaneous plants slowly spread. The service is now observing how these two processes are unfolding throughout the cemetery and comparing their outcomes.

The key idea that I want to advance in the remainder of this essay is that such ecological approaches are not merely convivial, open-ended experiments, but have introduced a singularly distinct mode of valuing plant life within the urban political economy of horticulture. While horticultural approaches had been predicated upon displaying *undead* plant commodities, ecological management is putting to work plants that are *lively* and capable. This change is

predicated upon not only rethinking which modalities of plant life are desirable, but also what their life is *for*.

Purchased by green space departments in their thousands, horticultural flowers must promise to stay alive throughout the whole season within the confined space of the flowerbed. They are *undead* commodities: while, like other lively commodities, their value is derived from their “remaining alive for the duration of their inclusion in the commodity circuit”^{iv}, it in fact resides in their ability to stay alive *without showing too much liveliness*. Their staying alive, furthermore, requires intensive resources, both human and technical. In contrast, the animate, interactive, ground-covering, spontaneous and perennial plants used in ecological approaches are seen as capable *lively beings*, who can use their vital force, their interactive capacities, and their spatial skills to perform tasks, some which are explicitly aimed at sparing the very resources demanded by horticultural plants. And indeed, during a press conference in the summer 2016, the direction of the green space department was clear: “On the one hand, we are optimizing resources and materials. On the other hand, we are now giving more room to vegetal intelligence [...] This contributes to the reduction of our maintenance tasks”^v. This link made between new approaches to plant life, and the reduction of maintenance tasks suggests that, by controlling each other in flowerbeds, or by spreading and transforming the surface cover of cemeteries, urban plants are increasingly valorized for their maintenance-sparing *potential*.

I suggest that such *potential* is in fact another name for plants’ *labour power* – “the aggregate of those [intentional] and physical capabilities existing in a [plant] being, which [they] exerciz[e] whenever [they] produc[e] a use-value of any description”^{vi}. Without delving too much on the conceptual debates around the notion of non-human labour^{vii}, I take inspiration from anthropologist Tim Ingold’s contention that animals can be enrolled in work situations in different ways, on a continuum from instrument to labourer^{viii}, to discuss how such a reading can help us to (re)think the question of agency in urban design. While many would object that *work* entails an intersubjective, collaborative experience, ill-fitted to the reality of plant life^{ix}, I want to suggest that feminist studies of work, with their insistence on modalities of work and labour which do not entail a conscious, reflexive self-definition as labourer, can inspire an experiment in thinking work beyond consciousness altogether.

In this final section, I want to examine the ethical and political implications of the two modes of valuation of plant life identified – *undead commodities* and *lively labourers* – for the distribution of agency in urban landscape design. Whilst carefully designed, with their static lines and grids, the flowerbeds and arrangements of horticultural approaches are decidedly

shaped by the mode of existence of plants as commodities. Horticultural firms, on which municipal green space services rely for the production and reproduction, each season, of new annuals, edict norms pertaining to the minimum number of flowers and colours to be included in a purchase. Floral variety, therefore, is strongly shaped by the increasingly internationalized, oligopolistic, horticultural market, and its catalogue. A flower production manager explains: “The quantities we have to purchase now! Horticultural companies set norms, for instance if I want a total of 1,000 begonias, in 3 colours, so 300 in each colour, they won’t let me. I have to purchase a minimum of 1,000 flowers in each colour, and the total purchase has to be at least 2,000 flowers”. Municipalities which are reorienting their approach to ecological management put a greater emphasis on their own ability to choose, grow, and nurture the plants they want to work with. This is no light decision: while the need to constantly be purchasing plants is lessened, having the capacity to design, nurture, and monitor lively plants requires good production infrastructures and design-oriented posts. In the years it was setting up this new approach, Geneva’s green space department invested in a new horticultural production centre, and hired an unprecedented number of landscape architects.

This is because more, rather less, design is required in order to *produce plants as labourers* within convivial experiments. When working with horticultural, generally exotic, taxa, flowerbeds are rarely designed according to plants’ needs and their ecological relations (beyond perhaps the need for shade or sun). Given the short duration of time they are kept for, and the insistence on the visual quality of flower compositions (rather than on the ecological quality of their relations, for instance), few parameters need to get into the balance. With the open-ended designs, and longer time-frames, of modes of ecological management, designers’ attention is refocused on producing the right environmental interventions on plants. Spontaneity is carefully curated: plants needs to be put in the best conditions to express their potential, and for as long as they can. This, evidently, requires careful work. This work, and this agency to design non-design, are reclaimed from a political economy of undead commodities.

On the maintenance end, in spite of official discourses advocating using vegetal intelligence to decrease maintenance tasks, work is certainly not merely *transferred* from humans to plants. Instead, the nature of human work changes to accompany the transformation of plants from undead commodities to lively labourers. Within horticultural modes of managing vegetal life, gardeners were working within the limits of a pre-set temporal agencement of tasks. Flowerbeds could be uprooted every 31st of May and 30th of October, and the grass cut every

other week. Within the framework of ecological maintenance, increased attunement to plant life, and therefore observational work, is required. If flower meadows are to re-sow themselves, there is a short window of time during which they can be cut, and this can't be planned according to human schedules. Too soon or too late, and the plants will not have produced seeds, or these will be too mature, and the meadow won't be able to do its work. However, when compared to more active modes of intervention (such as weeding out), such labour is hardly visible – precisely because plant labour is invisible itself, due to the specific temporalities of plant life. Fears of being seen as passive, by an urban public to which they feel accountable, are at the core of oppositional attitudes of workers towards this new approach to plant life in cities. For a renewed, reclaimed urban political economy of plant life to be emancipatory, the implications of the redistribution of labour beyond the human work collective need to be acknowledged. My hope is that acknowledging explicitly the more-than-human dimension of labour could inspire modes of bargaining and collective action that both celebrate decommodified urban ecologies and politicize the ways that non only plant life, but different types of labour, are valued.

ⁱ Translatable as “differentiated management”, “harmonious management”, and “zero phyto”.

ⁱⁱ On these concepts see: Aggeri, G. 2004. *La nature sauvage et champêtre dans les villes: Origine et construction de la gestion différenciée des espaces verts publics et urbains. Le cas de la ville de Montpellier*. PhD dissertation, ENGREF ; Dubost, F. 2010. Les paysagistes sous la bannière de l'écologie urbaine. *Ethnologie française*, 40(4), 629-638; Legrand, M. 2015. *La mise en ordre écologique des parcs urbains: savoirs, pratiques et paysages: exemple d'un grand parc francilien*. PhD dissertation, Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris ; LIZET, B. 2010. Du terrain vague à la friche paysagée. Le square Juliette-Dodu, Paris X^e. *Ethnologie française*, 40(4), 597-608.

ⁱⁱⁱ As suggested by: Arpin, I., Mounet, C., & Geoffroy, D. 2015. Inventaires naturalistes et rééducation de l'attention. Le cas des jardiniers de Grenoble. *Études rurales*, 191(5), 89-108.

^{iv} Collard, R.-C., & Dempsey, J. 2013. Life for sale? The politics of lively commodities. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 45(11), p. 2684.

^v Cited in: Weck, J. de. (2016). Ôter du béton pour verdir Genève au-delà de ses parcs. Tribune de Genève, 30 août 2016.

^{vi} From Marx, K. 1867. *Capital*. Vol. 1.

^{vii} For this, see: Barua, M. 2017. Nonhuman labour, encounter value, spectacular accumulation: The geographies of a lively commodity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(2), 274-288; Battistoni, A. 2017. Bringing in the work of nature: from natural capital to hybrid labor. *Political Theory* 45(1):5-31; Besky, S., & Blanchette, A. (eds.) Forthcoming. *How nature works: Rethinking labor on a troubled planet*. School for Advanced Research - University of New Mexico Press; Ernwein,

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^{viii} See: Ingold, T. 1983. The architect and the bee: Reflections on the work of animals and men. *Man* 18(1):1–20.

^{ix} See for instance: Porcher, J. 2015. Animal work. In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.