<u>**Plant Plast**</u>

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> Rather it seems as though a general law of intrusion can be discerned at this point: there is no such thing as a single intrusion, as soon as an intrusion occurs it is immediately duplicated, and identifies itself in constantly new and internal distinctions.
>
> Jean-Luc Nancy[1]

The wrapped or potted root-balls in Ilona Ruegg's series 'Trees older than me, waiting' (1997) were carefully uprooted and stored. Thus they are separated from their origins, and also insulated against their present location. 'Uprooted matter' is not just being stored here; the act of storage shifts it into contexts and arrangements in which roots are replaced by quite different linking forms. The hoses that water the trees make the storage arrangement into a network, extending the root strands into a supply system that ties them together and puts them on a equal footing. The extended context combines and holds together, just as it also divides within this layout in anticipation of future dispersions. It thus constantly initiates other integration modes: being 'uprooted' no longer means detachment, it starts to indicate something else. Location is replaced by storage as a transitional position, with potential future locations inscribed within it.
In the same way, the labels that appear on some of the trees are not ascribing names or categories. They indicate other possible contexts that differentiate the trees and tie them into other evaluations and other possible locations, in anticipation of future replanting. What counts is not the link, but the possibility of it - the label that in 'Trees older than me, waiting 4' [ill. 1] is lying on the ground without a tree means that any category is merely possible, isolating the labels as free-standing elements in an open structure. In the image itself, the hoses allow themselves similar room for manoeuvre by disappearing behind trees and pots then popping up again somewhere else; they also seem to break off in the middle of the image, and in its foreground ('Tree older than me, waiting 1' [ill. 2]). Only the light that catches the hose here indicates the backward curve that continues the network, even if it is not intelligible in the form itself. The hoses or labels cannot simply be referred back to the garden or plot, of which only parts can be seen in the works, nor to the trees or their sequence. Instead, their various connectivities create a situation that is permanently open to sequences of events that can expand uncontrollably. De- and reterritorialization, old uprooting and new rooting overlap and arrest the trees in an intermediate space that can no longer be addressed in the dimensions of origin and belonging. It should instead be seen as an arrangement of different networks that occur contiguously, determining, cancelling and expanding each other.
Distinctions between organic and inorganic also blur when fluxes run through both, forcing their functions to relate permanently. If an organic element is a factor here at all, it is as part of an unbounded machinic assemblage linking heterogeneous elements in variable combinations and functions and thus integrating previous/original locations as well as future/virtual ones.[2] The scarcely legible logo in the folds of the plastic wrapping on the central root ball in 'Trees older than me, waiting 4' dissolves these links (upside-down) as **'plant plast'**.

Flat multiplicities

A tree- and image-machine of this kind reaches out in two directions. It includes various groups of elements (trees, hoses, the surroundings they are tied into), and also duplicates itself in internal distinctions that constantly break up the groupings themselves. In 'Trees older than me, waiting 4', the trunks on the edge of the image do not belong to olive trees but to palms: these are deposited in the same collection but produce something quite different by disrupting the arrangements themselves. From the point of view of the palms the apparent alignment of olive trees becomes a mere accumulation of heterogeneous components, throwing the series back on itself and undermining any sense of unity.[3]
As far as the image is concerned, this means a juxtaposition that shatters its coherence, releasing other elements that can be linked to each other in many ways, without having to fit into a greater whole. The spatial co-ordinates are cancelled out by the profusion of visual information: one would have anticipated a horizon, which normally guarantees three-dimensional depth for the image. Here, as in other works in the series, there is an entanglement in which foreground middle ground and background mingle and co-ordinates become unclear; not in the form of stratification, for which the hedge could be seen as a background, but by making it an integral part of an amalgam.[4] However, the image really opens up above and below the central zone, where the elements are deployed so that they can be

reincorporated (in a different way) within the plausibility of the image. Just as the palms do not seem to belong in this olive grove, which is not one, the shoot revealed in the upper part of the image does not really belong to a trunk but is detached as a tree in its own right; what otherwise stands for the sky in the image is not a background for the branch within the spatial gradation of the image. It is just a capturing, framing element for the branch that makes it stand out as if back-lit.[5] Then this 'tree', which could still just be part of the hedge, attaches itself as a branch of the bagged-up trunk, which is thus no longer a stump (or at least not only); this makes the little tree's position even less clear. A similar reclassification also occurs on the lower edge of the image: the protective sheeting is just peeling off the palms and making the uprooted element into a little landscape in its own right, inserting itself into the image as a trace of brightness, taking account of the otherwise unresolved horizon line and at the same time creating it for the first time. Complexity in this image-machine is not produced by plunging into the depths or by stratification, but by multiple planes that permit heterogeneous juxtaposition, rather than an extended two-dimensional quality. Repetitions also take place across the dimensions of the work on these planes. As the young shoot in the upper part of the image can be said to double and thus deterritorialize 'tree', the different dimensions of the pictorial elements overlap 'Trees older than me, waiting 3' [ill.3]. The pile of earth in the background, as a mass of soil, recalls the root-ball in the foreground, but it is also an earth bank that aligns the trees, while itself being only another form of arrangement. Heap and alignment meet at the centre of the image at the pile of light-coloured sacks. These are inscribed into the structure as yet another form of deposit, thus expanding the arrangement repertoire almost diagrammatically.

The latitude these repetitions open up always links different time frames more or less explicitly as well. Even the title 'Trees older than me, waiting' deploys the trees between the poles of already-being-older and still-waiting; uncertainty about what belongs to what in the case of the young shoots and old trunks indicates that they too are involved in a contradictory chronology. The new shoots are always young and unhinge the dualities of duration and beginning, old givens and new occurrences: they are linked by the fact that the trunk is cut and by the new growth of the shoots to a point of intervention. It is an intervention that constantly creates beginnings and thus can always start all over again.[6] So the trees occupy, in a fundamental arrangement of temporal and spatial shifts, variable positions that do not create a place/location, but a hybrid space that reaches out in all dimensions, thus also extending into the 'me' of the title. This is always included in the arrangement as a reference-point and opens the tree-picture machine on to a deterritorialized subjectivity.

Branches

The palm silhouettes in 'Fair Town 5' (2001) [ill. 5] are from the outset part of a much more temporary installation. Just as 'Trees older than me, waiting' is not landscape or even nature but a garden, 'Fair Town' is not a town, but architecture. The trees acquire their imposing quality not least from the apparent inappropriateness of the shifts they undergo. In 'Fair Town', as also in the 'Town Town' series that preceded it, architecture indicates nothing but its own horizon. It elaborates its encounter-forms as a free game, in which there can be no outside that it could stand out against, or that could counterbalance it as something Other. Even the palms in 'Fair Town 5' do divide themselves off from other elements, but at the same time, with their visible lath supports they are a prominent part of the architectural construction. Then within this construction, as imitations of nature, they in their turn link up with the bamboo fence that is leaning over in the lower part of the image and extends the lorry body to the conclusion of a space whose other end is formed by the palm façade.

The palm silhouettes are just as little palms as the bamboo screen is a fence or even a forest, but the view from behind that the work offers is not a glimpse behind the scenes but a view of another kind of arrangement that itself deals with visibility and its limits. This arrangement remains very close to the image, perhaps more clearly than elsewhere in Fair Town. The pictorial space is expressly organized only as a surface in which the foliage screen forms a background to the bamboo and palm outlines and repeats both of them in terms of surface quality and motifs. And so here the space stretching between them turns out to be a mere possibility created by shifting of elements.[7] Any fixed horizon for this space is blocked by the foliage, then refused again in the horizontal arrangement of the palm silhouettes. Instead of forming the background, the line of palms is superimposed on it, and follows the edges of the image rather than an imagined horizontal, folding to meet those edges.

The various architectural arrangements in the 'Fair Town' series are always just one configuration of space and time, volume and structure among other possible ones. The white volume that runs through the series does not simply open on to an interior that is never really resolved as an inside space and often negotiates its borders. It is also bound into an interplay with other temporary features and containers, from the pavilion frame to the wastepaper bin. Even the permanent exhibition hall and tower (as far as even these can really be considered durable) appear here simply as a background that almost disappears in the reflection in their windows as pure light in the photographic image. Thus it

always has to contend with the white skin that is not just stretched over its frame but always moves across the surface of the picture as well, thus competing with it. In this way connections emerge as extensions of the architectural quality, detaching themselves almost entirely from its arrangement.

Volume and surface undermine each other mutually in these deviations, but their shortened perspectives, and arrangements that are not parallel with the image, insist on occupying space in a wide range of different ways. Whilst the pavilion frame stakes out volume and structures space, the white skin for its part asserts and monopolizes that space without organizing it. Here totally different modalities are confronting each other, and the various elements of the 'Fair Town' series allow continued thinking about them in new ways.

Ambivalent and polyvalent

Here binary oppositions do not go far enough, especially when two pairs of motifs are offered. Fixed and mobile, fixture and intervention, nature and artificiality constantly cancel each other out within the operation of the works and are replaced by structures of multiple categorizations and integrations.[8]

Just as in the 'Fair Town' works built architecture is always to be seen and thought of, or is relevant, only from the temporary grouping of the trailer caravans, 'Fair Town' does not present models for different architecture either. The model function is fundamentally different: in contrast with the non-places of Utopia, fair installations and exhibition centre architecture, the exoticism of palm trees and garden arrangements are spaces of a different kind. They fulfil genuinely physical and also metaphorical functions, and thus assert themselves metonymically (as concrete insertions) and mythically (as models).[9] In Ilona Ruegg's work it is precisely this ambivalence that is repeated and doubled when she makes arrangements, architectures and their impinging on each other into pictorial constructions in which space and time and image occur only blurred and interconnected. If in fact what we have here is something like a model for other places, then it is only as (pictorial-)spatial proposals for possible subjectivities that can occur in or through them.

Orientations

Slope and incline oscillate almost continuously. First of all, in 'Hang und Neigung 5' (2001) [ill. 5] there is a thicket in which the exploring eye gets lost in the filigree tangle of the branches, but physical orientation in relation to the picture space is tilted as well.[10] And then the lamp, whose alien quality emerges imperceptibly, but then persistently, introduces another kind of (dis)order into this entanglement: it identifies the strip of light in the top right of the image as a stepped path from which the image disintegrates and rearranges itself again.

The lamp, as a bright point, at least promises the possibility of orientation, so the (visual) thicket and the sense of being lost in it have necessarily to be thought about and seen through the path. This opens up a very different entanglement over the whole surface of the image, made up of light patches and lines, drawn into various alliances by the lamp. The lamp illuminates the thicket by day,[11] thus indicating visibility or the promise of it, but not redeeming that promise. The lamp also loses itself as a piece of brightness within the entanglement of the image to which it holds out the promise of transparency. The linking of lamp and paths, in terms of both form and content, is joined by the visual link with the light areas to the left of it. These are more prominent, but not round enough to be a lamp and not clearly enough placed to be a path. And it is from these areas that the roaming then continues: to the light areas on the lower edge of the image, and then again to the steps on the path and from them to the scrap of sky on the upper right-hand edge of the image; or also from the lamp to the tree-trunks, which are oriented in just the same way and just as bright as the lamp-post, but a little more irregularly shaped than it, and thus suddenly seem to be placed with a similar lack of motivation: its apparent arbitrariness is directly communicated to them. Even the weaker patches of light are charged as continuations of these series of elements, in which the whole pictorial field begins to shimmer.

The juxtaposition and opposition of the promises of orientation in the wood and the orientation of the view in the image produce a form of close-up that runs through the images as an almost haptic quality,[12] at the same time remaining bound up within the collisions of the various legibilities. Orientation no longer holds here, because its different possibilities run up against each other, creating another kind of wandering that now takes place within the thicket of the image. The distinctions that the lamp is actually claiming are no longer clear; in fact the lamp is now entirely responsible for the confusion.[13] It is not nomadic, it imposes a nomadic quality by constantly releasing elements and making the image approachable precisely between its different charges. Here orientation opens up to the quite different form of being somewhere without actually getting there.

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[1] Jean Luc Nancy: *L'Intrus*, Dedale 9/10, Paris 1999.

[2] Just as organic and inorganic are coupled here, the otherwise polar models of tree and rhizome, which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used to develop their concept of machinic assemblages diagrammatically, also penetrate each other. Cf. Gilles Deleuze/ Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London 1988.

[3] These works are not about landscape (or even shifted nature), but about gardens in the broadest sense, as a means of bringing elements together in arrangements. The alignment of trees in Ilona Ruegg's works as a contemporary form of garden is deliberately placed beyond any creative intentionality, at precisely the point where storage replaces the organization and design patterns of localization and area in the present day (see Michel Foucault, Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1984* ,"Des espaces autres", Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité, no. 5, October 1984, pp. 46-49 As an arrangement beyond the notion of garden, not before it, the functional positioning of the trees also rejects compositional/creative arrangements and replaces them with the contexts of operations.

[4] The fact that the photographs are black and white contributes considerably to this visual mingling.

[5] This kind of juxtaposition is also played out entirely on the surface in Ilona Ruegg's work in technical terms as well. The works are definitely and deliberately not photographic prints, but digital prints: while an image can only be dissolved into different pictorial qualities (and ultimately lack of focus) in the grain of a photograph, each dot in a digital print is a discrete information unit. Apparently unfocused or bright areas are thus always just different arrangements of basic units that are constant within themselves.

[6] Time as a historical dimension is offered as an additional perspective here (precisely in terms of Foucault's categories as well): since when and how have plants been planted? When are they put in which pot? Or also with reference to 'Hang und Neigung': since when has there been lighting in parks? When (and since when) do woods become parks?

[7] The majority of the 'Town Town' works too are based on shifting and expanding operations, in architecture and image.

[8] The ideas that are being developed in this essay within the works and between them could also be developed in a similar way between the various series. Perspectives can always be duplicated further; for example, the palms in 'Fair Town 5' can also be seen as a recourse to the palms in 'Tress older than me, waiting 4', thus raising questions about yet other orders and arrangements.

[9] Foucault, in his draft 'heterotopology' (note 3) mentions precisely festival sites and museums, (exotic) holiday villages and the garden, as well a brothel and colony, as outstanding examples of such other spaces ('heterotopias').

[10] The view of the slope is almost from above in the photograph, and as such actually promises an overall view, but it undermines this by the lack of any clues or orientation points in the landscape detail shown.

[11] The lamp shows the way in that it is almost the only thing that identifies the light strip as a path. 'Indicating' here means two things: one the one hand, making something clear in a situation, as a real illumination of the path, and on the other hand indicating something in the image, in which it is not dark at all and the lamp nevertheless appears (only) as light. In this arrangement lighting includes illuminating in a way that makes the path stand out from its surroundings, and also providing light for its own sake, making things visible.

[12] In *A Thousand Plateaus* (note 2) Deleuze and Guattari (using very different works) sketch the outline of nomadic art as close-up form in which overall visibility gives way to a haptic quality.

[13] But in the same way as lamps in other works in the series create something quite different, it is also impossible to rely on this confusion. It too constantly breaks off and the various lamps only duplicate the scandal of (dis)orders of various kinds encountering each other.