

In these film works and installations our being with plants is gently moved around different perspectives on the plant “other”, but all the while we are drawn into intimate spaces in which we can face this otherness and come to be more acquainted with plants, and their being. It is not a one-dimensional journey of the purely visual; we are taken to *Life as Plant* through sound, text and the visual and, in this collage of experience, introduced on a more intimate level to the challenges plants face when entangled with humans. In these intimate encounters, the work offers us questions, as Gareth Evans, film curator at Whitechapel Gallery writes, that are “never posed as a threat but always offered as a gift towards mutual appreciation of the perhaps previously unspoken.”

(Evans, G., 2017, p. 49)

In my own research work at Gothenburg University, I work in collaboration with artists, scientists and educators in questioning *Life as Plant*. In particular, I am interested in how

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by ‘looking through an artistic lens’ is it possible to appreciate/identify/acknowledge plants in new ways?

(Wilson, M., Snæbjörnsdóttir, B. and Sanders, D., 2020)

In this investigatory process artists and filmmakers can bring our attention to plants in ways that can provoke new relationships and change our encounters with those beings, which at first sight, appear to us as “other”, and, as such, strangers in our midst. In her work *Ellie Kyungran Heo* brings us into conversation with the plant other, and in so doing, in the words of the philosopher Levinas, forms “an ethical relation”, which should be welcomed “as this conversation is a teaching” (Levinas, E., 1979). As such, the work in this exhibition,

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*Resists the overlooked and the under-heard, the marginalisation of places, people, creatures and things that do not demand. It resists easy co-option. It resists for a little while the ongoing erasures. It says, like all work of worth, ‘this was’, ‘this is’, ‘remember’. Let’s not be timid – she’s asking us how to live; how we are living...”*

(Evans, G., 2017, p. 53)

Plant extinction is accelerating (IPBES, 2019). Being able to attend to the life of plants in our world is to face the future, for plants are the basis of most life on earth. Our human narrative is inextricably entangled with plant life. Encounters with plants through art can provoke us to take another look, and see, the seemingly unseen.

## References

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# Plantarians, 2017-2020

Ellie Kyungran Heo

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www.galleri54.com · www.elliekyungran.com

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Galleri 54

# Encounters with Conflict and Intimacy: The Presence of Plants in the work of Ellie Kyungran Heo

Dawn Sanders, Associate Professor, University of Gothenburg

Plants nourish us physically, sustain our emotions with their beauty and provide us with comfort, as companions in our homes and memorials for the dead. And yet, in this relational space between human and plant, between the seeing and the seen, there is conflict, confinement, restraint and capture.

In the installation: *Plantarians: Appendix (2020)*, in which a human female is boxed in, and has little space for movement beyond the constraints of the frame, Ellie Kyungran Heo presents a visual metaphor for plant roots seeking space while imprisoned in a pot. As we, the human viewer, witness this moment, her art provokes us to consider a different perspective on life as a house-plant, one in which “plantness” is curtailed and imprisoned in the modern human home. With this work the artist asks us:

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*Why is it that we place a plant in a pot, constricting its ability to grow and occupy physical space?*

Ellie Kyungran Heo,  
*Plantarians: Appendix*,  
video still, 2020



From forests to deserts, mountains and savannahs, peat bogs and pavements, plant morphologies are adapted to diverse environments distributed across the planet. It is rare to find a habitat in which some type of plant is not able to survive. In this breadth of existence, plants have evolved multiple forms, complex strategies and extensive relationships with other lifeforms.

Despite being surrounded by this ecological complexity, contemporary human culture has often reduced *Life as Plant* to binary choices between “good” and “bad” plants. Hence, those defined as “weeds” are stalked and removed with a tenacity that, at times, appears, as in Ellie Kyungran Heo’s film work, verging on the violent. It is, in this part of her work, that the artist uses enhanced sound, along with intense close-ups, to draw us, the viewers, into the naked vulnerability of plants classified as “weeds”, aligned with the horticultural equivalent of *Persona Non Grata*, and forcefully extradited from the human garden.

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*The general definition of a ‘weed’ is ‘a plant in the wrong place’, or ‘a plant growing where it is not wanted’. I wonder, what then is the right place for a plant to grow?*

Recently, Heo has considered the place of plants in cemeteries and those cultural spaces between plants brought to remember the dead; either as cut flowers left near graves or cultivated plants gardened nearby, and those individual plants, which freely appear in the cracks of a gravestone where human visitors rarely, if ever, attend. In these interstices of grief and growth where do memory, life, death and otherness entwine and entangle these vegetal/human meetings?



Ellie Kyungran Heo,  
*Am I wrong?*  
Research still, 2016



Ellie Kyungran Heo,  
*Plantarians: The garden on your belly*, video still, 2020