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ATTENTION AND ABANDONMENT:

FINDING LOST PLANTS IN THE CITY

As I write this foreword much of human attention is directed towards a virus and many are living life differently. But during these strange times a movement

has begun in some European countries. In France it is called *Sauvages de ma rue* and in the UK *More Than Weeds*. The campaigns involve paying attention to the plants growing in the walls and pavements of urban cities and naming them using chalk scribbled on pavements and walls; ephemeral maps of the botanically attentive gaze; signposts for others to follow on their limited excursions outside of “home” (The Guardian, 2020).

Sara Dunker’s book is an art-based addition to these urban trails and in her work she makes explicit a critical starting point: her own gaze, which she follows in a journey of walking, noticing and looking. Some of her images align with traditions of botanical herbarium practice—pressed and flattened specimens closely set with their name or a possible name, upon which she has to decide. In this journey she mirrors the early forays of Linneaus and his apostles setting out across Sweden, and the wider world, to collect and name its green constituents.

FOREWORD

Dawn Sanders



ALBRECHT DÜRER & THE LARGE TURF In 1503 the German painter Albrecht Dürer painted his watercolour “*The large Turf*”. A small painting (41 × 32 cm), it is seen by many as a turning point in human renditions of plant-life. Lubbock (2008), for example, notes that Dürer’s painting:

“Doesn’t visually isolate or distinguish its various plants. It presents them in a state of natural disarray, confused, interleaved, entangled. Though each growth is clearly identifiable, the picture is far from being a biological ID parade. It is a slice of living, chaotic undergrowth.”

The contemporary British artist Mat Collishaw has wondered why, in an era rich with religious imagery, Dürer chose to focus his attention on a “seemingly insignificant clump of weeds” (Aloi, 2019). Richard Mabey in his book *Weeds* considers it to be “painting’s discovery of ecology”. In making this painting, and presenting it to the viewer, Dürer creates a realistic window on a very ordinary group of living plants, but in taking the “worms’ eye view” (Pavord, 2005) he brings us, the human viewers, deep into the world of plants and allows us to take in the intricate details of each blade and stem, and to realise that there are many shades of green in a green world. Sara Dunker follows Dürer’s excursion into the aesthetics of ordinary plants, but in her world there is always a sense of human presence, which sometimes borders on the oppressive.

THE LOST & FOUND One image from Sara’s work moved, and now haunts me. It is, I believe, a symbol of how far our relationship with the plant world has collapsed. How invisible “Life as Plant” has become to us. It is the photograph of a dumped house-plant- possibly a Yucca- in a mangled plastic bag, ironically printed with a human face, abandoned on a roadside. This discarded, half-dead plant, encapsulated in an icon of human presence is a symbol of all that



we have become. Reducing the biodiverse world of plants to artefacts for human use or decoration: fleetingly present in our lives and easily discarded. In this I am reminded of the words of Richard Mabey in his book *'The Cabaret of Plants'*:

“In the absence of respect and real curiosity, attentiveness falters. Complex systems become reduced to green blurs, with dangerous consequences for both us and for individual species” (Mabey, 2015, p. 5).

In drawing our attention to the plant inhabitants of city walls, verges and pavements Sara highlights the potential places our gaze could take us, even if it means witnessing the lost lives of abandoned plants. If we choose to follow her gaze we might then question what it means to live “Life as Plant” and perhaps awaken our sympathetic imaginations.

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HOW MANY PLANTS DID YOU SEE TODAY?

In the urban environment we have become separated from nature that we hardly notice what does actually exist around us. The plants have been reduced to being nothing more than decoration, or a backdrop. Therefore, they are not perceived as living.

With my own gaze as starting point, I want to make the presence of plants visible around us. During walks I have collected and documented what I found. What captivates my interest, in what ways is plants present around us? How does my approach change over time?

