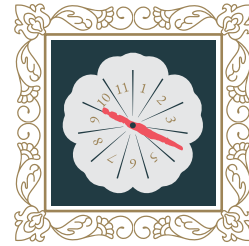


14 Phytonic Oracle

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What will be described below is an artwork and poetic intervention that proposes a ritual in the form of an oracular consultation.¹ The Phytonic Oracle is a participatory installation based on the wisdom of plants. It was created by stepping into relationships with eleven selected flowers and allowing them to guide the process. The outcome is an attempt to give plants a voice, and an invitation to humans to witness the vegetal world.

To explain and describe this work within a framework of academic thought is a contradiction in itself. However, what can be meaningful is to situate the work in the fields of philosophy, biology, and art, and to describe the artistic research that is facilitated by the Phytonic Oracle.

Who Will Pollinate the Flower Clock?

It all started with a plant installation in 2021, which was part of the Mänttä Art Festival in Finland curated by Anna Ruth. I proposed an installation entitled “Who Will Pollinate the Flower Clock” as a re-enactment of Carl van Lynne’s floral clock from the mid- eighteenth century.² The installation featured eleven plants that could grow in the climate of Finland, where the exhibit was taking place. The selected plants were pollinator friendly; that is, they would attract bugs, bees, and butterflies by offering nectar and pollen in exchange for the pollination services of the insects. In the Flower Clock, the plants open and close their petals following a circadian rhythm. Knowing when certain flowers open or close allows the observer to estimate what time of day it is.

My work with these plants entailed intensive engagement with their properties. I researched their needs, their preferences, their daily and annual rhythms, their preferred growing conditions, their pollinator interactions and any human use of them for their medicinal or toxic properties. It turned out that most of these eleven plants were generally labelled as “weeds,” sometimes considered invasive, but primarily not species you would select to grow in your backyard. For the installation, these plants were inserted into a patch of land in



Figure 1. Phytonic Oracle book and tool. (Image courtesy of Christina Stadlbauer).

front of the museum and grew considerably well. The installation was set up for the art exhibition. However, it was also playing with the notion of audience, and expanding the usual group of museum visitors to include gardeners, local passers-by, and, of course, the insects that were attracted by the flowering field.

Made visible through my Flower Clock, the choreography of insect-flower pollination is a vital eco-system service, one that humans appreciate. Honeybees are a celebrated example of this and are known for their essential role in guaranteeing food supply. But pollination should first and foremost be seen from a plant's perspective: as a necessary intervention for propagation via fruit and seed and as a sexual act (Hustak and Myers). The insect pollinator cross-pollinates—that is, it transports pollen between different flowers—to ensure fertilization. The transport of pollen between the stamen (the male part

of the flower) and the pistil (the female part of the flower) can facilitate the creation of seeds.

Pollination is an encounter between plants and insects, and it has effects that go beyond simple logistics. It clearly causes an immediate reaction within a plant that is communicated internally. As Calvo and Lawrence explain in *Planta Sapiens*, “when a hibiscus flower is visited by pollinating insects, the intimate act of pollination triggers signals which result in an increase of the respiration rate in the ovary sitting at the base of the flower” (Calvo and Lawrence 96).

The pollinator, in turn, is rewarded by picking up nutritious nectar and pollen, and is informed via various cues as to whether a flower has been already pollinated. These cues include visual evidence, smell traces from chemical substances, and a change in the electrical charge that can be sensed by an insect. This way, superfluous trips to already pollinated flowers—empty of nectar—can be avoided.

Such trans-species communication highlights the diverse ways in which different species interact, cooperate, and adapt to their environments through mechanisms that bridge the gaps between them. The signalling by plants about their pollination status is one such example. For instance, they can signal by opening or closing their petals—a common feature in the vegetal world (van Doorn)—to increase the chances of attracting certain pollinators that are active during specific periods of the day or night. The closing of their petals follows a circadian rhythm, but is also dependent on whether pollination has occurred or not (Fründ et al). Closing flower petals serves several purposes. Once pollination has occurred, the closed petals protect the developing seeds and reduce the chances of further pollination that might interfere with the successful development of seeds. Seen from the insects’ perspective, closed petals are an unambiguous signal not to visit.

The Flower Clock installation had a human concern at its heart: the wish to know the time. But, as it turns out, the installation did not tell time very precisely. The opening and closing of the petals depended more on a plant’s communication with its environment and with pollinators than on the time of day.

Thus “Who Will Pollinate the Flower Clock” performs a re-definition of time by proposing a “plant time” and points towards urgent concerns that are related to an ongoing loss of habitats and, ultimately, a decline in biodiversity.

The Phytonic Oracle

At the end of the exhibition, I felt a strong desire to continue working with the eleven flowering plants. Consequently, for the following year, I proposed a new installation that included the same plants but that took a different approach. This work would be more conceptual, shown in a gallery setting and designed for a merely human audience. What emerged was the “Phytonic Oracle,” a prognostication tool that translates wisdom from plants into advice for life situations (Fig. 1).

I had harvested some specimens from the installation in the autumn, and these became the starting point for the Oracle. Additionally, with the information I gathered from botanical books, herbal medicine literature, online discussion forums, and also with inspiration from astrological readings and Tarot,³ I began to develop a system for prognostication. The unique features of each plant became increasingly apparent to me through my prolonged, personal engagement with them.

For example, while many of the plants had yellow flowers—as seen in the field, in photographs, and in the dried version of the flowers—the yellows were very different from each other. The greens of their leaves, their shapes, their textures, their seeds, and their roots also all became relevant and enabled me to understand the plants at a level that transcends scientific descriptions and empirical knowledge. I developed a sensibility for these characteristics that allowed me to grasp their nature. I started to know the plants by engaging with them through my senses; touching them, smelling them, tasting them meant relating to them in diverse modes. This way of working influenced me. At one point, I was so immersed in the research that I was dreaming about these flowers. I became aware that, by radically opening myself to them, they had started to affect my thinking. Thus, the flower as object was not as important as my relationship with it. Such an approach to interacting with plants shifts one’s “understanding” from a mere intellectual grasping to knowing via new forms of listening (Wilson 59). This shift can be considered embodied knowledge transcending the idea of one sole truth that can be measured and unambiguously characterised. In Shawn Wilson’s *Research as Ceremony*, these multiple realities are acknowledged and described as the basis of “indigenous ontology” (73).

The Functioning of the Oracle

All the knowledge I had gathered, the understanding of the character of each plant, its unique capacity to inhabit this world and adapt to challenging situations, its taste, its looks, its feel, its colours, and its companion species became the basis of my Oracle book. I started a work of “translation” by transforming this information into meaning for everyday situations in human lives.

I created a compendium consisting of four categories: growth, pollination, value and habitat. Each of the categories is based on the particular characteristics of the plants and forms the basis for the advice offered by the Oracle. A plant’s “growth” characteristic provides answers to questions about identity and personal development; “pollination” describes relationships, love, and emotions; “value” is assigned to work and purpose in life; and, finally, “habitat” is linked to well-being, housing, or travel. Though sourced from scientific information about the plants, my translation was performed intuitively and was grounded in the relationship I had crafted with the plants. Additionally, it was inspired by astrological readings, Tarot card interpretations, and other prognostication practices.

When we think about divination or prophecy as methods for predicting the future, the question of what lies behind the advice arises. Although there is nothing scientific or proven about any of these techniques, they have been used in times of confusion or crisis to reflect on possible futures. Whether they can foretell the future or whether they are just coincidentally correct guesses remains open to debate. In predictions, no claim of accuracy can be made, but seeking and receiving advice nonetheless creates a conversation with the subconscious or with a game with chance, and these methods do have a valid role in helping one to advance in life (Hon). The answers or advice from the Phytonic Oracle are not intended as stringent instructions, nor as the sole way forward that should be taken to heart. Rather, an answer expands the range of possibilities by showing one aspects of a situation that might not have been considered earlier. For instance, an unexpected way forward might be highlighted, a veiled notion might be reformulated, or a hunch might be substantiated. The Oracle’s answers are vague and concrete at the same time, and can be related to a specific life situation that is at stake. The validity of prognostication lies therefore not so much in the “correctness,” precision or stringency of a potential next step, but rather in the opportunity that it creates to contemplate possibilities and to reflect on blind spots or options that had not yet been considered.

Engaging the eleven plants as sources of wisdom might add an unexpected layer to previously established divination systems. Answers originating from the vegetal world follow different rules than those from the human world. The permanently sedentary existence of plants relies on resilience and adaptability that cannot be compared to human routes to success, which often involve mobility. Other dimensions of time or periodicity are observed when we consider plants, and these dimensions grant us glimpses into circadian or seasonal cycles of life and death. When seeking advice, such issues might help one to take a more distant standpoint in order to see the broader picture, or to refocus on what is simple or essential.

In the summer of 2022, the Phytonic Oracle was presented at Finlayson Art Venue as a participatory intervention. Visitors were able to seek out the Oracle during opening hours and made use of it. When visitors consulted the plants, a protocol had to be observed so that people could receive answers to very specific questions. This protocol added a ritualistic or ceremonial aspect to the visit and was as follows:

The Oracle is in a dark, intimate room, and only one person at a time can enter. The visitor's question has to be formulated before entering the Oracle room. Once inside the Oracle space, the "Oracle tool" has to be operated; this is a metal pointer that must be spun, allowing the mystery to unfold. The pointer comes to a stop at a number between 1 and 11, indicating which plant is ready to respond. After determining in which of the four categories his or her question belongs, the visitor consults the Oracle book and retrieves its advice. The Oracle has then spoken.

From the guest book comments, I saw that some visitors made it a habit to come several times a week for advice and took the vegetal answers very seriously. What was a playful pata-botanic⁴ proposition became an object of meaning and assistance to the visitors.

The situation created by the Phytonic Oracle proposes an alternative reality system. Asking advice from the plant kingdom takes us into the liminal, the magic, and the speculative. A person in a state of emotional confusion or mental disorientation seeking advice from an oracle is coming close to a ritual that needs to be carried out to overcome crisis. This act can be assigned to the realm of "magic" rather than to the domain of traditional problem-solving (Campagna 116). The visit to an oracle aims at restoring the conditions in which both the

visitor and his or her world can regain their full presence, and can continue a mutually active and imaginative relationship. That is, this visit entails stepping out of the state of crisis, which can be described as a temporary inability to act, to imagine, and to overcome the temporary loss of our sense of reality (Campagna 116, 230).

As a magical intervention, the Phytonic Oracle therefore proposes to resolutely oppose the process of disintegration. Turning one's focus towards a world that is not informed by reason but instead playfully invites one into a state of sensing rather than of knowing may release the tension that prevents fluidity and connection with one's environment.

The ability to prognosticate is traditionally attributed to seers. It belongs to the realm of magic and non-scientific thinking. Recent research, however, has suggested that plants have a capacity to sense the future. As Paco Calvo and Natalie Lawrence point out, plants follow a different time-scale (Calvo and Lawrence 77). They are "slow" due to their immobility, which makes their movement only possible in terms of growth; that is, they grow towards a location. However, when they grow in a certain direction, the information that guides this growth and behaviour needs to be information about a future, one that will lead to success. If a plant invests a lot of energy growing in the wrong direction and then finds no nutrients, water, or light, it is in deep trouble. To predict and respond as early as possible to environmental change can be seen as anticipatory growth. Plants are thus forced to predict and, in this way, can be understood as being gifted with prognostication.

The Meaning Behind the Oracle: Changing Roles

The Phytonic Oracle is part of an artistic research strand that explores the possibility of communicating with non-human life forms. This research has been ongoing with different species and has led to speculative, absurd, and ritualistic works that question both our mainstream understanding of "intelligence" and the relations that we humans practise with the forms of life surrounding us. In the case of the Phytonic Oracle, the interspecies communication is between plants and humans—and vice versa. The Oracle becomes an amplifier for the "voice" of eleven plants that have a message for humans. When reading the Oracle, the visitor learns about the selected plants. She or he is introduced to vegetal life forms that constantly surround us everywhere and that often go unnoticed. The invitation is to acknowledge and witness the presence of these life forms. The Oracle seduces the visitor into conversation with the plant

world, and a potential relationship is established. This cannot be assumed to be a conscious process, but rather the relationship might happen of its own accord. If the latter scenario occurs, the artwork can be considered successful.

Consultation of the Oracle encourages openness. The plant-human dialogue that is prompted suggests reversing the roles between “human and nature.” Attributing wisdom to plants elevates them, makes them experts. The human visitor is looking for advice and comes to ask the plants. The answer she or he obtains is sourced from a “wisdom” based on the diversity that can be found in the plant world and that is conveyed via its forms, properties, resilience and capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. The usually dominant paradigm of human control is put aside: here, humans ask, and plants give a valid answer. Playfully and without judgement, the visitor’s role becomes one of not knowing, and the plant world is granted the capacity to resolve complex issues, answer essential questions about life, and become our allies in facing unknown futures.

Working Methods and Conclusion

The working methods employed for creating the Phytonic Oracle and for my artistic research in general emphasise embodied understanding and learning grounded in watching and doing. During my preparation of both the Flower Clock and the Oracle, the plants became part of my daily routine; I was reading about them, growing them at home, seeing them as “weeds” on street corners, or drinking them as herbal teas. This was not a conscious search for them; instead, an openness, alertness, or awareness towards these flowers made me see them. Hence, I started relating to these plants in a different, more profound way, with every accidental encounter being as valid as intentionally looking up information about them. These plants affected my senses, offering me images, tastes, smells, textures. A conversation without words was unfolding, and this conversation became the basis for the messages in the Phytonic Oracle book.

To give a voice to other life forms carries the danger of anthropomorphising them, which misses the point entirely. However, using language, communication, and relationships as proposals to shift our viewpoints, playfully and open-endedly so that we do not insist on correct or exclusive approaches, might help to decolonise our stance towards other than humans (Despret and Bento). Speculation, science fiction, magic, and artistic interventions that refrain from logic or explanation might be able to generate a possible change of direction more effectively than a study based on scientific evidence.

Using a language distinct from scientific terminology can trigger a learning process by encouraging us to reflect on the importance of the beauty and the role of plants, on the need to preserve biodiversity, and on vegetal capabilities that have yet to be described. Art that interacts with botany and biology, and that dialogues with these life forms, assumes a responsibility grounded in high levels of trans-disciplinary skills (Scialabba) because the questions that this art asks span discourses from science to ethics and from ecology to economy. Which species are worth protecting? Where do we draw the line between weeds and useful plants? Should what is useful for humankind be valued more highly than what is useful in an ecosystem? How do we define “useful” at all without falling into a trap? Carefully defining strategies of inquiry and avoiding sticking rigidly to (pre)defined methods is key here (Wilson 39-40) and research based on artistic practice might be a helpful way forward. Relying on “Phytonic answers from the Oracle might give guidance and direction and unexpected support in life’s most difficult and demanding situations.”⁵

Notes

- 1 Participatory Installation, Plant Oracle, Christina Stadlbauer, 2022. This work was made possible by the assistance of Lynne Stuart, Gosie Vervloessem, and Petri Heino.
- 2 Horologium Florae. See also “Linnaeus’s Flower Clock.”
- 3 Tarot card deck by Rider-Waite.
- 4 “Pata” refers to a concept described as the “science of imaginary solutions.” It was invented by the French writer Alfred Jarry (“pataphysics,” or, in French, “pataphysique”), and it is understood as a “philosophy” of science. See also how FoAM has used “patabotany” (Kuzmanovic).
- 5 From “Instructions on How To Use The Phytonic Oracle,” Finlayson Art Venue, Tampere, Finland, 2022.

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