

The paradoxical garden: a practice-led study of sculptural installation as ecological intervention

by

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ABSTRACT

Title of mini-dissertation: The paradoxical garden: a practice-led study of sculptural installation as ecological intervention

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The Paradoxical Garden is a collection of sculptural installations that focus on human-plant interactions in the garden to emphasise the connection between humans and their environment. Herein 'nature', as a human construct, and 'culture' are depicted as part of the same phenomenon in response to Bruno Latour's (2011) perception that the current ecological condition is a result of a disconnect between nature and culture. The definition of garden as nature 'improved' by culture is questioned. Instead, Mateusz Salwa's (2014:317) definition of the garden as a place where culture becomes nature and nature becomes culture is more appropriate. The garden is reimagined and visualised as a clear example of how 'nature' and culture exist in a relational web. Following a dialogical approach to making, I depict the conversations between human and plants using artistic methods such as a visual journal and watercolour sketches. Plants are portrayed as participants in the complex system of the garden instead of passive recipients of human will. The paradox of the garden is based on the idea that it is a space where relationships perceived as binary such as nature and culture; artificial and natural; and object and subject co-exist and meld into one another. In agreement with Robyn Longhurst (2006), the garden offers an opportunity to create alternative views. *The Paradoxical Garden* can be described as an ecological intervention in its aim to address the philosophical disconnection between nature and culture.

In *The Paradoxical Garden*, the artwork embodies the relationship of care that develop between a gardener and the plants in the garden. Interactions with plants based on Josephine Donovan's (2016) understanding of care are collaborative and considerate. Both

the plant and the gardener are affected; the plant by being cared for and the gardener by tending to the needs of the plant. Being influenced by the aesthetics of care and actor network theory (ANT), which gives prominence to the relationship between actors where neither human nor non-human is dominant, means that this study is relational in its approach. Rather than a medium, plants are presented as subjects with agency, who become active collaborators in *The Paradoxical Garden*. The plants that form *The Paradoxical Garden* have proved themselves to be strong-willed and resilient, resulting in three bodies of work titled *Care*, *Co-Create* and *Commingle*. Each body of work emphasises a different aspect of the plants' agency through collaboration that strengthens a sense of connection with non-human nature. This sense of connection assists with the experience of being part of the environment instead of in control of it. According to Timothy Morton (2007:44), this would lead to more ecologically responsible behaviour.

1.1 Key Terms

South African art, immersion, binaries, actor network theory, aesthetics of care, practice-led research, ecological art, relational theory, South African garden, human-plant relationships, indigenous plants.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

In this practice-led study, I create a sculptural installation as ecological intervention aimed at challenging conventional understandings of the garden. The garden, as a microcosm of the relationships between humans and 'nature', is often perceived as a place where wilderness is domesticated, and 'nature' moulded to human will (Power 2005:39). In this conventional view, humans are perceived as separate from nature. Gardening involves control of the 'natural' elements in the garden, which is shaped and tamed according to the gardener's vision of a pleasing landscape. According to Russell Hitchings (2003:103), this controlling act over 'nature' is evidence of the continued existence of the culture/nature binary. Glenn Parsons (2008:120) defines the garden as an aesthetically pleasing object with nature as medium. Accordingly, the gardener is central to the garden, but her interference is carefully disguised to blend in with the environment (Parsons 2008:116). In this way, a human's 'contaminating' presence in the 'natural' garden is rendered invisible. The garden is linked to privacy where, according to Ted Kilian (1998:119-120), an individual holds control over her surrounding space. Interestingly, private gardens that are visible to passers-by, can be considered as porous enclosures that allow for public engagement¹. The garden mediates a discussion between the gardener and passers-by, by means of the arrangement of plants that are experienced in the public eye (Bhatti, Church, Claremont 2014:51). It forms an interesting in-between space where private ideas are selectively shared, which increases the political power of such an enclosed realm (Kilian 1998:119-120). Therefore, in addition to providing private pleasure, the garden could also be considered as an ideological statement. Despite widely recognised efforts to negotiate binary perceptions, as seen in phenomenology (Wylie 2007:147) and postmodernism (Riley-Taylor 2002:39), the separation of concepts into binary pairs such as culture/nature, natural/artificial and public/private persists in conventional perceptions of the garden.

According to a relational understanding of human-nature relationships, gardens are places where interactions between humans, plants and environmental factors such as rainfall,

¹ However, the potential for exchange between passers-by and gardener is limited in South African neighbourhoods where high walls often obscure visibility.

climate and soil properties, play out. Such a view of the garden is described by Emma Power (2005:39) as a “hybrid achievement” between active human and non-human nature,² as opposed to the understanding of nature as a docile backdrop to human culture. In the same manner, Robyn Longhurst (2006:582) describes gardens as “entangled formations” where, according to Ann Winston Spirn (2008:44), the human role is that of co-author, in communication with non-human nature. For Mateusz Salwa (2013:383), people participate in gardens together with other non-human actors such as plants, in an aesthetic attitude³ towards ‘nature’, where ‘nature’ is treated as a subject. Viewing the plants and other elements as equal participants results in respect and care that is not centred on human benefit (Salwa 2014:317).

For the purpose of this study, I present the garden as a collaborative entanglement between human and non-human nature. The garden is considered as cultivated ground that forms part of the domestic space where humans engage with non-human nature on a sensory level (Bhatti & Church 2001:366). Through attending to the agency of plants, the study aims to upend conventional binary conceptions of the garden. Gardening is perceived as human actions enlisted by the will and needs of plants. Further, as co-collaborators, plants play a sentient and active role in the creation of the garden. Thereby the definition of ‘nature’ as that which operates without the agency of the human, in opposition to ‘culture’ as human action is revised by attending to non-human nature’s agency (Uggla 2014:87).

Ecological concerns have a significant presence as a theme in art practice in galleries, both internationally and in South Africa. Andrew Brown (2014:6), a specialist in modern and contemporary art, views ecological themes as part of the mainstream of art; he explains that it is incorporated in art in many forms, from more distanced critique to active involvement and intervention. In addition to this, Brown (2014:7) refers to the importance of art in redefining binary relationships such as culture/nature. This sets the platform to explore human interconnectedness with the immediate environment and include interspecies connections. The latter has become a prominent theme explored in animal studies, but interspecies debates have not included the botanical world in their deliberations. Giovanni Aloï (2012:17-26) focuses on incorporating flora in interspecies connection and communication, and more recently, in leading discussions in the *Botanical Speculations Symposium* dedicated to acknowledging the growing importance of art in dealing with

² Non-human nature describes all natural elements that are not human such as plants, animals and minerals in acknowledgement of humans as part of nature, not separate from it.

³ In this study, an aesthetic attitude is appreciative, or looks for things to appreciate.

botanical themes internationally (SAIC 2017:sp). An example of this is the art installation *Hanging Garden* (2010) by Jennifer Wen Ma (Figure 1), who uses living plants painted with black ink in her installation. During the period of display, the installation changed in appearance as the plants pushed out green shoots. Wen Ma considers that each living component of the installation express their presence and actively participate in the installation; Chen Nan (2013:20) describes this as a dialogue. The description of *Hanging Garden* (2010) as a dialogue is in line with definitions of the garden described previously by Salwa (2014:317) as a collaboration between plants and humans. Salwa (2005:40) draws on the established notion that plants enlist people and other creatures to assist in their propagation and survival using their visual appearance and properties. According to Hitchings (2003:107) 'enlisting' occurs when an entity exerts power over another to act out their desires, such as when flowers attract pollinators through their scent and colour. These enlistments inform Actor Network Theory, which regards nonhuman nature's agency as significant. I agree with Power (2005:46) that such a collaboration is achieved when plants enlist the care and interest of attentive gardeners, or in this case, an artist.



Figure 1: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Hanging Garden in Ink*, 2010. Plants and ink. Dimensions 2000 x 800 x 300 cm. (Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art 2012:sp).

The relationship of care between people and plants forms the leitmotif of Vaughn Bell's *Personal Biospheres* (2003-2004) (Figures 2 and 3), where plants become wearable, and the wearer becomes constantly aware of the plant's needs. By acting on the needs of plants, humans enter a relationship of care with plants, which further unsettles the culture/nature binary (Power 2005:48). This relation of care is an adaptive and attentive attitude towards non-human nature (Donovan 2016:10). Similarly, Salwa (2014:317) suggests that in the garden, nature and culture are integrated, not opposites, and the same applies to the natural and artificial.



Figure 2: (Left) Vaughn Bell, example of *Personal Biospheres*, 2003-2004. Installation and performance works, clear acrylic domes, hardware, plants, soil, moss. Dimensions variable. Boston and Cambridge, MA, and at The Soap Factory, MPLS, MN (Vaughn Bell [Sa]:sp).

Figure 3: (Right) Vaughn Bell, view from inside one *Personal Biosphere*, 2003-2004. (Vaughn Bell [Sa]:sp).

In addition to the continued prevalence of themes such as identity, memory and belonging that reflect the grappling with the newfound democracy in post-apartheid South African art, ecological concerns are increasingly widespread. The emphasis on flora to explore nature-culture relationships is, however, emerging rather than established, and can be seen in the work of a small number of artists. Claire Jorgenson's installation *Ice Garden* (2009) represents the garden as 'a nature' maintained by an artificial system (Jorgenson 2012:sp). Even though the artificial is hidden, its presence is essential to the maintenance of the natural appearance of the garden, concealing the perception that nature/artifice are opposites. Jorgenson's artwork, as well as those of Jennifer Wen Ma and Vaughn Bell mentioned previously, uses human knowledge of plants and connection to plants in a garden to create awareness of human embeddedness in the ecology, with the intent of encouraging more ethical behaviour towards it.

I propose a view of the garden as paradoxical in order to challenge the separation of nature and culture and humans and nature. The paradox is based on the abundance of dualistic and seemingly contradictory concepts in the garden that allows for the negotiation of binary concepts such as nature and culture, public and private and natural and artificial, amongst others (Longhurst 2006:581). A significant contradiction is the perception that humans are separate from the natural world, whilst the garden shows how human behaviour and non-human nature connect in a way that is irrevocably entangled. In effect, these dualisms become destabilised, and concepts that previously seemed to contradict each other become accepted. In destabilising the duality between humans and nature, the dominating behaviour of humans towards nature is questioned and visualised through artistic practice. I aim to destabilise the binary relationship between nature as passive and culture as controlling and dominating. The act of destabilising will be extended to the conventional perception of artifice and nature as binaries by visualising their co-existence and mutually dependent relationship in the garden. Simultaneously, the garden, will be situated between the private and public realms in order to challenge the power imbalance between them. My sculptural installation accentuates the shift from a binary perception of human-nature interactions to a relational understanding evident in a contemporary view of the garden.

Binary thinking has informed and dominated Western thought since the mid-seventeenth century (Riley-Taylor 2002:33). The binary worldview is rooted in Cartesian dualism, which views the mind and body as separate and opposing entities (Riley-Taylor 2002:33). Forming the foundation for several dualisms such as male/female, subject/object and culture/nature, the separation of concepts into binary relationships is problematic because one is usually seen as dominant over the other (Elbow 1993:22). Ecological philosophers Timothy Morton (2007; 2010), Bruno Latour (2004; 2011) and William Cronon (1996) argue that Cartesian dualism lies at the root of the ecological crisis the world is experiencing. For Morton, Latour and Cronon the separation between nature and culture results in a perception of nature as something distant, to be managed for the benefit of humans (Uggla 2014:79). Such an anthropocentric worldview disregards the autonomy of non-human lifeforms, such as plants. According to Latour (2011:3), humans are literally reshaping the earth, labelling the current age as the time of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a geological term that refers to the increasing scale of human activity and its significant impact on the planet (Ferrando 2013:32).

When humans are seen as outside of nature, it problematises the relationship between nature and culture. For Cronon (1996:81), this leaves no opportunity to search for an “honourable” place for humans in nature. When human cultural actions are perceived as

opposing nature, human acts are necessarily understood as artificial and contaminating. This is true to a degree if one considers polluting practices such as irresponsible waste disposal. Yet, Cronon (1996:80) argues that by upholding an ideal of untouched nature or wilderness as pure, human presence would always compromise the integrity of the natural. Latour (2011:8) points out the need to remove nature from its pedestal, parallel to Spiri's (2008:45, 60) description of humans and human settlements as part of the natural world. Humans need to see, experience and feel themselves as enmeshed with nature, according to Morton (2007:64), to alleviate the distancing that binary concepts of nature uphold. As Cronon states (1996:81), to be embedded in the ecology would encourage accountability, thus humans would reconsider the way they use resources from the natural world.

On closer inspection, it becomes evident that binary relations in the garden are complex. Gardens mediate between public and private spaces (Harrison 2008:43; Francis & Hester 1990:14) as the private space of the garden deals with public interference in the form of interest from neighbours or passers-by (Longhurst 2006:586). Kilian (1998:117) represents these mediations as power relationships rather than properties of space. From an ecological perspective, Mark Bhatti and Andrew Church (2001:380) argue that intimate, reflective moments spent in the privacy of the garden may enable a deeper connection between humans and non-human nature. However, because these intimate experiences seep into the public arena and become visible they are represented as having public presence and political influence. This makes gardens the ideal space to explore dualities.

In order to destabilise these deeply-rooted binary perceptions, I refer to relational theories such as Latour's actor network theory (ANT) (1996) and Josephine Donovan's (2016) aesthetics of care. ANT seeks to challenge the reductionist approach of Cartesian dualisms with a relational understanding of the complex interactions between the environment and its various human and non-human 'actors' (Hitchings 2003:100). The aesthetics of care proposes the decentring of the human as the first step towards connecting to the 'other' as subject (Donovan 2016:9). For Donovan (2016:10), the recognition of non-human nature as subject results in a caring rather than exploitative relationship where humans are attentive and respectful towards non-human lifeforms. The human subject is therefore decentred, rejecting an anthropocentric view, in acknowledgement of nature's agency.

To approach the garden as paradoxical becomes particularly complex in a South African context where the garden is viewed as deeply rooted in colonial history and associated with ownership, privilege and domination (Wylie 2014:10). From this perspective, the garden is viewed as a western construct, and is contested by postcolonial thinking as denying the

other and its environment. Settlers brought with them the flora of Europe with which they surrounded themselves to aestheticize and render the seemingly barren South African landscape familiar and simultaneously distinguish themselves from it. Balfour (1997:127) describes this as an attempt to create a duality between self as garden and other as the unknown desert or wilderness. Discussions about the South African garden then, not only has ecological implications but also relates to identity (Wylie 2008:8). This confirms the presence of the constant tension between indigeneity and settlerdom that formed much of South Africa's history in the garden⁴. Often used as postcolonial trope in South African literature,⁵ as discussed by Sally-Ann Murray (2006:46) and Robert Balfour (1997:123), the South African garden not only functions as a barrier between self and other, but can also act as a mediator. One such example is Freedom Park on Salvokop, Pretoria, which commemorates liberation struggle heroes⁶.

Yet postcolonial interests overlap with the posthuman approach taken in this study in its attempt to redress the inequities of capitalist expansion (Huggan 2009:6). The overlap occurs in its criticism of the dualistic anthropocentric worldview of the Cartesian subject in search of a relational approach between lifeforms. Furthermore, to assume the garden is just colonial would erase an entire non-western history of humans using the garden as a form of engagement with the natural world, or as JB Falade (1990:47) states, "to reconcile [humans] within their surroundings". From a posthuman view, the emphasis shifts to the ecological importance of the garden and the engagement between human and non-human nature. The garden is therefore employed in this study as a posthuman trope, rather than a postcolonial one.

1.2 Statement of the problem and research questions

This study proposes that a sculptural installation can challenge the binary relationships that characterise conventional understandings of the garden as a cultural-natural configuration. By showing how human and non-human nature are intertwined, an awareness of non-human

⁴ Sources that discuss the colonial history of the South African garden include *The Politics of Nature and Science in Southern Africa* (2016) by Maano Ramutsindela, Giorgio Miescher and Melanie Boehi and *Trouble in the garden: South African botanical politics ca. 1870–1950* (2011) by Jane Carruthers.

⁵ Both Balfour (1997) and Murray (2006) refer to *Another country* by John Maxwell Coetzee (1984) and *The life and times of Michael K* by Karel Schoeman (1983).

⁶ Freedom Park on Salvokop, Pretoria mediates between the Post-Apartheid present and the Apartheid-era past by commemorating the lives lost in the struggle for freedom. The park utilises plants symbolically in the *Garden of remembrance* where indigenous trees from various provinces refer to the diverse cultures that inhabit South Africa.

nature as subject will move towards destabilising an anthropocentric perspective. The aesthetics of care (Donovan 2016), where people and plants are interconnected in a relationship of care and in ANT (Latour 1996), which emphasises interaction between human and non-human actors, informs my creative process. The creative process is treated as a critical enquiry into existing relationships in the garden as paradoxical where these relationships are questioned and reimagined. The process of enquiry is visualised as part of this practice-led study.

My creative process is adopted from the processes of gardening and growth. As such, my creative practice mimics the process of cultivation, where various entities (or actors) with different properties are placed within the same space, affecting one another through action and reaction (Power 2005:39). I appropriate actions such as feeding and watering, and processes such as growth and decay, to transform conventional perceptions of the garden as a place of dominion and ownership. Instead of presenting the artist-gardener as a central figure that shapes and transforms nature, I establish the garden as a place where multiple actors play a part (Jackson 2015:30). Furthermore, I present these plants as actors as subjects with equal power, as Donovan (2016:11) proposes. My creative process and the act of creating is the result of thinking through these contradictory and challenging relationships in order to re-imagine them as intertwined.

The destabilisation of the specified binary pairs in the garden is enhanced by representing relationships, connections and similarities. To visualise my thought process, objects are made fluid to morph or hybridise into each other, adopting material properties of the other and therefore blurring the boundaries between them. An example of this is melting a rigid plastic object such as garden mesh into organic forms. I select materials to evoke particular associations, for example string for its ability to weave and form connections or paper for its porous, responsive character. Similar to the process of gardening, art practice as research is led by intuition in a non-linear fashion where a state of in-betweenness and ambiguity is accepted.

The research questions that arise from the contextual framework of theory, are therefore:

- I. Since the creative process mimics natural-cultural processes that occur in the garden such as cultivation, growth and decay, how may such a process-orientated approach assist in dismantling dualistic notions of the contemporary garden?
- II. How may an immersive aesthetic experience of an artistic garden and the human-plant interactions therein orientate the viewer towards a relational understanding of nature and culture?

1.3 Aim and objectives

This study aims to present an artistic interpretation of the garden as paradoxical to encourage viewers to respond with increasing care towards cultured-natural vegetation. In light of the current ecological crisis⁷, a sensitive orientation towards plants may encourage more responsible pro-environmental behaviours (Bhatti & Church 2001:380). This investigation therefore encapsulates a relational, paradoxical version of a contemporary garden and employs the immersive properties of sculptural installation to communicate this. Artistic practice, informed by the cultivating practice of the garden, becomes a means to destabilise the culture/nature binary. According to Morton (2010) and Latour (2011; 2004), art has the ability to change perceptions, specifically to facilitate a non-anthropocentric understanding of ecology that embraces multiple subjectivities. I follow their reasoning and aim to create awareness of an ecological agenda by subverting conventional binaries such as culture/nature, nature/artifice and subject/object that perpetuate notions of ownership and control over nature. This study contributes to visual arts research on the relational aspects of gardens in South Africa and therefore expands a currently limited field of study.

This study comprises the following objectives in order to realise the main aim:

- A contextual and theoretical review to consider the current approach to ecological concerns in art practice and the garden, pointing out practices particular to a South African context. Selected national (including this study) and international sculptural installations that make use of the garden as theme to promote an ecological agenda are included in this discussion. This analysis examines the role of art in destabilising and representing ideas about cultural-natural configurations.
- Using artistic practice to create awareness of the entanglement of human and non-human organisms in the garden with the aim to decentre the human in relation to cultured-nature. As an artist-researcher, I adopt the practice of a gardener in making art to amplify the relational qualities of a gardener's behaviour towards plants and their response.

⁷ The current ecological crisis include but are not limited to environmental changes such as climate change that affect biodiversity and rainfall patterns and other factors such as pollution and deforestation.

1.4 The theoretical approach of the study

In this study, I subscribe to a posthumanist repositioning of the human from the anthropocentric to the ecocentric. Posthumanists argue for the repositioning of the human amongst other life forms towards one where an increased awareness and responsibility toward non-human life forms is necessary (Wolfe 2010:47). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2007:176) explain that in the posthumanist process of altering perceptions about human and non-human relationships, imagination and artistic creativity have an important role to play to re-imagine the relationship between humans and non-human nature. More recently, combined efforts between postcolonial studies and environmental studies, called postcolonial ecocriticism, have established an area where the connection between people, and between people and the cultural-natural environment, is critically viewed and provides a place for new explorations of ecological relationships (Huggan 2009:5). These frameworks are based on relationships rather than dualisms.

1.5 The research methodology

A contextual review of relevant literature is firstly employed to develop the theoretical context in which this study is situated. According to Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste (2009:6), this involves exploring literature on topics that inform the artwork undertaken for this study. The methodology utilised for this research is therefore practice-led, meaning that the process and content of artistic production are researched in order to establish how art practice contributes to the production of knowledge, understanding and perspectives (Borgdorff 2012:46). Studio-based practice, the contextualisation of creative practice, the creative process and critical reflection, form the components of this methodology where each receives due attention for the part it plays in the research process (Sullivan 2010:3; 2006:32). In this type of methodology, the artist-researcher plays the part of the creator (visualising ideas) and the critic (analysing the ideas and processes of visual representations) in a non-linear fashion (Macleod & Holdridge 2002:7).

1.6 A review of literature

My understanding of practice-led research is guided by Graeme Sullivan (2006; 2010; 2012); Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge (2002), and Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2010). Sullivan's (2010:4) description of creative practice as a form of research that leads to

creative and cultural insights is therefore adopted for this study. Practice-led research is sometimes critiqued for its lack of methodological 'rigour', although Macleod and Holdridge (2002:7) see it as a dynamic methodology that changes from case to case. However, there have been several useful attempts at developing academic criteria for practice-led research such as Hamilton and Jaaniste's (2009) account, which leaves enough room for creative development. Candy and Edmonds (2010:125) add that the artefact needs to be accompanied by text in order for knowledge to be shared. Although this is supported by several authors on the topic, including Sullivan (2010:xxiii), he adds that new understandings can be achieved through art practice that are not explicable through text.

In terms of sculptural practice, I refer to the writings of Claire Bishop, Jan van Boeckel and Renée van de Vall regarding installation art. Bishop (2010:11) relates installation art to contemporary ideas on embodiment and immersion. For Bishop (2010:6), installation art insists on the viewer's embodied presence, which results in a heightened awareness of the subjective felt experience. This knowing through the senses results in a decentred subject where there is no single distanced point to see the whole (Bishop 2010:11-13). In addition to this, van de Vall (2008:3-5) considers the effort required in viewing an installation in contrast with viewing a painting, for example, which provides the full picture, so to speak. With installation art, the viewer is required to imagine parts of the artwork that are not clearly visible. The idea of immersion in art, as being surrounded and becoming part of an artwork, is explicated by van Boeckel (2015:111). He includes the immersion of the artist in production mode as zooming in on the subject matter with all the senses, looking at it anew, resulting in a heightened sense of connection to the subject matter. In this type of immersion, all the senses, although not physically enclosed by the artwork, are engaged and focussed. For Dorothea von Hantelmann (2010:10-11), being decentred creates an opportunity for perceptions to change, which is the strength of art as a cultural format. This ability of art to review existing perceptions is the reason Morton (2007; 2010) and Latour (2011; 2004) wish to employ art in their ecological agenda. Morton (2007:1) states that "[...] it is in art that the fantasies we have about nature take shape and dissolve", acknowledging the role of the arts in constructing the idea of 'nature' since the Romantic period, and its potential to deconstruct it.

The ecological agenda on which this study is based is informed by Latour (2011; 2004), Cary Wolfe (2010) and Morton (2007; 2010), who build on concepts related to ecology popularised by Cronon (1996:69), which presents nature and wilderness as constructed concepts. However, these authors vary in their approaches. For Latour (2011:9), the earth

takes the form of what is referred to as Gaia⁸, a single living resilient self-healing organism assembled from a variety of often conflicting and contradictory components. Morton (2010:128) argues that humans should denounce 'nature' and accept that they are embedded in the world. The idea of being embedded takes shape in the idea of the ecology as a mesh where all living and non-living things are connected and interdependent, continually affecting each other (Morton 2010:28, 30). The idea of the mesh characterises the definition of ecology on which this study is based. However, Spirn's (1997:251) belief that nature is both a construct and a given concept that cannot be denounced completely is adopted in this study. In a posthuman vein, Wolfe (2010:62) emphasises a need to reconstruct what it means to be human in relation to other life forms by challenging anthropocentrism and speciesism. The writings of Emmanouil Aretoulakis (2014) serve to clarify the connection between various ecological views and how they relate to anthropocentrism. Although Morton (2010:12) is more vocal about the importance of the arts in changing human perceptions of nature-culture entanglements, both Latour (2011:2) and Wolfe (2009:44) make significant reference to the role of art as part of the process to form connections between binary oppositions. Emphasising connections rather than opposing characteristics would result in more respectful behaviour towards non-human parts of the ecology.

My view of the garden is informed by Salwa's (2014:317) perspective of the garden as a place for interaction with nature in the form of care. For Power (2005:48), the enactment of care in the garden is a form of domestication of wild plants that affects both plant and gardener. Donovan (2016) adopts the term 'aesthetics of care' to describe this relationship. By taking the responsibility to care for plants in the garden, they may be tamed but in turn, human perceptions and actions are altered to provide for the plants' needs. Spirn (1997; 2008) and Herrington (2009; 2007) are interested in the garden as a place where balance can be found between the natural and cultural. On the other hand, for Bhatti and Church (2001) the garden reflects social orderings and consumerist behaviour, which is not the focus of this study. In a South African context, social orderings highlight several historical and contemporary struggles which Murray (2006), Balfour (1997) and Wylie (2011; 2014) include in their writings. Wylie (2011:10) refers to political aspects related to the garden in its local context as "white escapist privilege", but indicates that the garden cannot be viewed as only that. For both Murray (2006:48) and Balfour (1997:127), the South African garden has its roots firmly in colonial history.

⁸ The concept of Gaia or Gaia-hypothesis was defined by scientist James Lovelock and has since been adopted by both Latour (2004) and Morton (2010).

The garden is viewed as a paradoxical space in this study. Paradox creates a state of uncertainty where seeming contradictory statements ring true (Oliver 2013:200). This state of uncertainty aligns conceptually with processes in the garden. Authors who support this paradoxical view of the garden include Baker (2012), Harrison (2008), Salwa (2013; 2014) and Longhurst (2006). For Baker (2012) and Harrison (2008), the paradox of the garden is in its being natural, cultural *and* artificial: properties usually viewed as contradictory. Longhurst (2006:581) adds that the garden questions everyday categories such as private and public; leisure and work; and individuality and sociality as it lies between these categories. The garden as paradox is based on the perceived distance between nature and culture, while the garden shows them as irrevocably entangled. To view the garden as paradoxical enables a renegotiation of binary relationships to assist a more inclusive configuration.

1.7 Review of visual texts

I selected a range of contemporary artworks to support my arguments. Each work uses the garden or processes akin to gardening to confront existing ideas about the relationship between humans and nature. *Hanging Garden in Ink* (2003) by Jen Wen Ma (Figure 1) and Vaughn Bell's portable environments, such as *Biospheres* (2003-2004) (Figures 2 and 3) use the garden as trope to destabilise current ideas about nature and plants (Ryan 2013:343). Wen Ma tests plants' natural reaction to human-made substances by, for example, painting them with black ink. These artists employ the garden to alter conventional perceptions of plants as docile. Vaughn does this by introducing portability, while Wen Ma uproots and upturns the garden. Vaughn questions a human perception of plants as a static backdrop by re-imagining the relationship between plants and people as inter-embodied (Ryan 2013:335). These works destabilise perceptions and challenge binary relationships.

The Garden of Excuses (2017) by Donna Kukama looks at plants to facilitate a healing process in a conversation between the artist and the visitor. The plants incorporated in this installation are medicinal plants indigenous to South Africa. The artist paired the visitor with the appropriate plant after a conversation about what area in their lives they would like to heal. Claire Jorgenson's *Waterblommetjies* (2010) (Figure 4 on page 30) explores the upkeep of gardens using artificial systems, while Steiner and Lenzlinger's *Falling Garden* (2003) and Jenna Burchell's *Urban Wetlands* (2012) make conscious use of the opportunity offered by the immersive environment to change perceptions (Frauenfelder 2006:31). Tomás Saraceno's *Airport Cities* (2007-2009) and Willem Boshoff's *Garden of Words* series (1981-

present) are featured for using installation art to envision alternative, albeit non-realistic ways in which the earth could continue to exist, in order to raise awareness of the ecological crisis. These artists uproot, re-imagine and destabilise the familiar in their critique of conventional ideas pertaining to relationships between humans and non-human organisms and objects.

1.8 Outline of chapters

Chapter Two, *The artist's garden in context*, outlines the characteristics of the garden as paradoxical and an artistic expression, and situates it in local and international artistic practice. Selected artworks and art processes that explore the cultural-natural configurations of the garden are analysed. Ecological views of the garden are clarified from a posthuman perspective and include descriptions of how relational theories such as ANT and aesthetics of care assist in dismantling dualisms.

Chapter Three, *Cultivating a relational understanding of the garden*, provides a reflection on my process of making. By relating art making to the cultivation process of gardening, I explore how Donovan's aesthetics of care is evident in the interaction between human and non-human nature in the artist's garden. How various actors within the ecological web of the garden relate to and modify each other is discussed based on Latour's ANT. Furthermore, I discuss how process and thought are linked in the creative component of this study.

Chapter Four, *The transformative effect of aesthetic immersion*, discusses how being immersed in the subject matter while making art may influence and adjust existing perspectives regarding plants and the garden. It also considers the immersive experience of the viewer and explores possibilities of how the immersive experience of *The Paradoxical Garden* may influence existing perceptions of the garden and its plants. The emphasis in both instances is on interconnectedness and the experience of an ecological assemblage as living and changing.

The fifth chapter concludes the study with a reflection on the ecological aims of my installation, *The Paradoxical Garden* (2018).

CHAPTER TWO

THE ARTIST'S GARDEN IN CONTEXT

This chapter situates the garden in the context of posthuman and postcolonial discourse in South Africa. The garden has been described as paradoxical in the previous chapter, and this chapter explains how binaries and the associated power relationships function within and outside of the garden. In a careful examination of the deeply-embedded culture/nature binary in conventional perceptions of the garden, the aim is to identify how these seeming oppositions are entangled. Greg Garrard (2004:23) calls the binary relationship between humans and nature the “anthropocentric dualism”. From this perspective, humans see themselves as the pinnacle of existence based on their ability to dominate nature, resulting in a separation of concepts into binary pairs such as culture/nature, natural/artificial and subject/object which persist in society and in conventional ideas about the garden. It is the aim of posthumanism to deconstruct this binary in both the day to day lives of humans, as well as on a more philosophical level.

The posthuman view embedded in this study is based on the idea that it has become necessary to redefine what it means to be human in relation to the non-human. My definition of posthumanism is informed by Cary Wolfe (2010), who emphasises its chronological placement as after humanism. Wolfe’s (2010) definition of the posthuman is a reaction to a set of questions that arise when being rational and controlling no longer serve being human within the relational web of earth’s ecology. Posthumanism can therefore be described as a search for a way of being human as *part* of the immediate environment as opposed to standing above it. In this study, the posthuman is aligned with the philosophical view termed critical posthumanism or ecological posthumanism. The purpose of posthumanism, as described by Latour (2011:2), is to address the separation between humans and nature, and to reveal that being human is one of many ways of being on earth; consequently, the functions of the earth extend beyond sustaining the human species. According to Ferrando (2013:27), posthumanism can also be described as post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic, where common discussions deal with renegotiating what nature is in relation to culture, subject to object, human to other, and vice versa. Renegotiating these binary relationships forms the fundamental debates in two subsequent posthuman ecological veins of thought, starting with deep ecology and developed further in dark ecology (Ferrando 2013:27).

Morton's (2007:143) paradox is that we cannot save nature before we let go of the idea of nature. In his book *Politics of nature* (2004), Latour also defines an ecology without the notion of 'Nature'. Latour (2004:25) believes that "if 'nature' is what makes it possible to recapitulate the hierarchy of beings in a single ordered series, political ecology is always manifested, in practice, by the destruction of the idea of nature." The idea of nature that political ecology has to relinquish, is the result of a political division that puts the indisputable and objective on one side, and the subjective and disputable on the other. Aretoulakis (2014:173) further clarifies this by explaining that talking about nature as an 'other' continues the separation between humans and other nature. With this comes the belief that if people stop referring to nature as other, they will no longer objectify it and will treat it with more care and consideration. As Cronon states (1996:81), to be embedded in the ecology would encourage accountability; thus, humans would consider the way they use resources from the natural world. Despite appearances at this point, dark ecology is not anti-humanist. Instead, it tries to revise perceptions about being human that enable improved relationships with the non-human.

The problematic effects of perceiving nature and culture as opposite entities are detailed to demonstrate why it is necessary to dismantle this dualism. The problematic character of the culture/nature binary is unpacked to show that this view excludes human presence from nature and perceives it to 'contaminate' a 'wholesome', 'pure' nature. Human actions and production are therefore seen as unnatural or artificial in contrast with a scenic nature. According to Grey (1993:466), to "vilify" the artificial in relation to nature depends on the nature /culture duality and therefore extends it. The subject/object binary relationship is identified in conventional views of the relationship between the gardener and the garden, in particular towards the plants that populate the garden. This binary is reviewed in this chapter to establish that the relationship with plants is not without interaction⁹ from plants, as they communicate their needs visually in various ways, and plants cannot be reduced to the medium with which the gardener creates as they are sentient beings¹⁰ (Aloi 2012:20). The garden as a place where all these dualities co-exist and overlap is therefore explored as a potential model to redefine the relationship between people and plants.

⁹ These interactions are broadly conceived within the materialist framework of Latour's Actor Network Theory and Jane Bennett's thing-power.

¹⁰ Sentient beings are living beings with consciousness and the ability to act or react to their environment and other things and beings within it.

In this study, human entanglement with plants is central to the investigation of the connection between nature and culture. An alternative perspective of the relationship between people and plants is explored using ANT and the aesthetics of care to identify various power roles in the garden. Actor network theory and aesthetics of care dismantle a conventional perception of the gardener as central in the constitution of a garden. It also recasts a relationship of care between the gardener and the plants in a light that shows how being attentive and acknowledging plants as active agents in the garden destabilises the domination of the gardener over plants. The model of the plant-person relationship in the garden is used as a point of departure to reimagine perceptions to view humans as part of nature. Selected artworks that employ the garden as trope to ecological ends are identified and discussed in this chapter as methods to reimagine existing binary relationships. I visualise how pushing the boundaries of human understanding of plants and their expected or perceived behaviour may enable a different perspective.

2.1 The garden and the gardener

This section is an introduction to the garden and the relationship between the garden and the gardener based on the shift from an anthropocentric to an ecological perspective. Here I argue that plants and other aspects of the garden play a significant role as *participants* as opposed to an anthropocentric view of the gardener as the controlling subject who orchestrates the garden in line with a particular vision. When realising that plants and other objects in the garden often dictate the appearance of the garden in conjunction with the gardener, the anthropocentric view is destabilised. Additionally, plants often prescribe the gardener's behaviour to serve their needs as evidenced when examining this relationship under the lens of Actor Network Theory. Therefore, the idea of the human as central and dominant, based on Cartesian thinking in relation to the garden, is destabilised. Binary relationships previously identified are briefly discussed and explored within a South African context in this section. Thereafter, a conventional perspective of the garden, including concepts such as plant blindness, is discussed as problematic.

2.1.1 Defining the garden

This study, following Salwa's (2013:374) definition, refers to the garden as the cultivation of a collection of plants in combination with living and inert matter that navigate the space between nature and culture. The garden could therefore be on a patch of land, or even an arrangement of potted plants on a balcony, which is based on the imagination of the gardener and experienced with all the senses. To establish a common understanding of the

garden, it can be understood as a place where a person cultivates, arranges and plants vegetation, mostly for aesthetic purpose rather than subsistence. In developing countries such as South Africa the garden, specifically the home garden found in rural areas and townships, has the main purpose of sustenance (Molebatsi, Siebert, Cilliers, Lubbe & Davoren 2010:2952). This does not automatically exclude these from the category of ecological gardens, but their mainly agricultural function indicates a different relationship with plants to the one explored in this study. Some gardens, such as the 'no grow' gardens discussed in Parsons (2008:123) and the installation *Bagel Garden* by Martha Schwartz (1979) do not find plants a requirement for the garden, but in this study, they are essential. The purpose of the conventional garden is described as "luxury space around the house used for relaxation, play areas, keeping pets, outdoor eating and the cultivation of ornamental plants" (Molebatsi *et al.* 2010:2952). In the contemporary view of the garden, ownership of land is implied, while it is not necessary in the case of the ecological garden, which can consist of potted plants. The ecological garden can be defined as a space where there is an intimate relationship between people and plants and a consciousness about how the plants relate to and impact on the immediate surroundings. Spirn (1997:249) understands the garden as "a product of natural phenomena and human artifice". As a space that includes both nature and culture, the garden can negotiate the differences between these seeming opposites. According to Spirn (2008:45), the garden includes "beneficial management", but she also recognises natural occurrences that are "beyond human control", while Salwa (2014:317) advances the idea that the garden merely contains both nature and culture, but that they become each other. This garden can thus be referred to as cultured nature that included instances where it is difficult to see or understand where nature ends, and culture begins. Such examples include the hybridisation of plants, bonsai trees or topiaries.

The perception of the garden as human control of nature, however, remains rife in garden literature. Such an example can be seen in an article about South Africa's rich diversity of ornamental plants and heritage plants for cultivation, where the authors Lorraine Middleton, a botanist and Piet Vosloo (2011:56), a landscape architect, describe plants as follows: "This enduring bond between mankind [*sic*] and plants has flowered into a profound human appreciation of plants as objects of beauty and gardens as works of art". Explicitly referring to plants as objects, these authors make their view of plants as being capable of manipulation and controllable by the will of humans clear. The authors' "appreciation" of plants, refers to plants as consumable objects rather than a living entity. This is the conventional view of the garden as a human achievement. However, I oppose this understanding of the garden as a human achievement alone in this study because it denies

the agency of non-human natures. Power (2005:41) considers the view of the gardener as central to the garden problematic as well. It is only when one gets closer to gardeners, explore their ideas and study their behaviour that one realises there is much more to the garden than first impressions allow. Longhurst's (2006) and Hitchings's (2003) studies of the gardener show that beyond the first impressions lie carefully hidden systems and planning that ensure the plants' needs are met. Plants are watered and fed, they need to have enough light and they need to be pest and disease free. This calls for multiple and continuous intervention from their human counterpart. For Power (2005:41), from a human centred perspective, this interference is believed to be contaminating, but this proves false from a relational perspective. In several interviews with gardeners with the aim to identify their day to day relationship with plants, Hitchings (2003:106) points out that the gardeners did not want to admit readily the amount of work their gardens required or how they had to adjust their plans for the garden to accommodate the plants. This information was only divulged when encouraged (Hitchings 2003:106). Here, explanations of the relationship with plants came to the fore when discussing their unique relationship and needs (Hitchings 2003:107).

The gardener adheres to the directives of a plant more readily than she would like to admit; she responds to the plant because she finds the plant desirable. According to Michael Pollan (2001:10), plants use aspects such as symmetry and sweetness that humans find desirable to enlist humans to their needs for example through fertilising the soil. One's understanding of the garden in this instance becomes more collaborative, with instances of negotiation and contest. As a result, Power (2005:39) describes gardening as a "dynamic process". The 'nature' component in the garden in the form of plants, starts to present itself as a contributing force. The garden is not as subdued or tamed as it initially appeared, and in resisting the gardener's vision, negates the idea of nature as docile. The treatment of nature in the garden as a submissive other is problematic if humans want to change their relationship with nature. I agree with Salwa (2013:380-381) when she proposes that people should take the nature part of the garden more seriously¹¹. According to Aretoulakis (2014:173), talking about nature as an 'other' widens the distance between humans and nature. If people stop referring to nature as other, nature will not be objectified, and will be treated with more care and consideration.

¹¹ Salwa (2013:380-381) states that the non-human part of the garden contributes a "dynamic, changeable and temporal character" that determines the appearance and experience of the garden.

With the intent to destabilise the culture/nature binary, the idea of nature is analysed and contested by Morton (2010) as a construct. He criticises the Romantic¹² description of nature as a peaceful awe-inspiring space “over yonder”, saying that it is rather “monstrous and mutating” (Morton 2010:61). Dark ecology embraces all aspects of ecology such as cruelty, grime, competition together with growth, nurture, symbiosis, procreation and healing (Morton 2007:194-196). Dark ecology is an ecology without nature, meaning that no distinction is made between humans and nature; everything is interconnected because each node can affect another. According to Aretoulakis (2014:182), dark ecology, however, maintains a gap between the human and the non-human in order to retain its mystery and otherness. In acknowledging contradiction as an integral part of ecology, hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness are re-introduced and assist in blurring the lines between dualisms. Dark ecology acknowledges the connection between the human and non-human, but maintains a respectful distance so as not to interfere in its processes. In other words, the boundaries and distance between human and nonhuman nature are negotiated and are not hierarchical constructions. Although Spirn (1997:251) fully supports relinquishing the construct of nature as separate from humans, she indicates that nature is not just a construct. I agree with Spirn that the interconnection between humans and nature needs to be emphasised, while an understanding of them as different entities also needs to be retained. I also agree with Salwa’s (2014:319) statement that it is no longer an option not to interfere with natural processes with the intent to preserve ecology, as such I disagree with the dark ecological strategy of distancing the human from the non-human.

Morton’s description of dark ecology overlaps with Bennett’s (2010) thing-power materiality in its aims to be more attentive to non-human things. New materialism explores the power objects hold over human beings and each other. In consideration of the current ecological context, both humans and nature are viewed as matter with unique, agential powers that affect those in close proximity. Aretoulakis (2014:188) summarises the aim of dark ecology to remind humans “[...] that they are guests rather than hosts on this planet and that unless they restrain themselves they will be disposed of by the non-human *other* whether that be inanimate nature or other, supposedly ‘inferior’ species.” This view of the earth as a living organism that is able to regulate itself, as well as heal and maintain itself at the cost of any species that may pose a threat, is called Gaia. Latour (2011) incorporates the Gaian idea of the earth as a living, resilient organism in his theory about the ecology. In addition to this, Latour (2011:7) further cautions against imagining nature as a cohesive whole, and to rather

¹² The relationship between humans and non-human nature in Romanticism includes views of nature as picturesque and sublime, but also as a carrier of the spiritual in German Romanticism, for instance.

view it as an arrangement of contrasting and conflicting entities and beings. Latour's (2011) view includes humans as part of nature, but emphasises the felt disengagement between them. In this study, the garden functions as a place to reconnect with non-human nature.

2.1.2 *The indigenous garden*

The complex history of the garden in South Africa informs current conceptions of the indigenous garden. As mentioned earlier, the tension between settlerdom and indigeneity is present in current considerations of the South African garden and identity formation. An increasing interest in indigenous gardens has been noted by Richard Ballard and Gareth Jones (2011:8) and Sally-Ann Murray (2006:47). Murray (2006:53) aligns this developing interest in indigenous gardens in South Africa with a global shift towards indigenous plants. Robyn Longhurst (2006) identifies three main reasons for a turn towards indigeneity, which I adopt for this discussion. She indicates that the developing interests in indigenous plants are based on their low maintenance in comparison with the high demand of care required for non-indigenous plants that are not necessarily suited to native conditions. The second reason cited is that there is an increasing ecological awareness that leads to the consideration of indigenous biodiversity where garden plants could contribute to improving ecological awareness. Lastly, she indicates that the turn towards indigeneity could be as a result of a search for an indigenous identity. The latter is particularly complex in South Africa's history.

In agreement with Longhurst (2006), Murray (2006:47) discusses indigenous gardening as representative of a search for a South African identity, while Balfour (1997:123) emphasises it as a postcolonial trope. Balfour (1997:123) explains the colonial origin and problematic nature of a perspective of the garden as other to its surroundings. For Balfour (1997:130), the alternative to changing the landscape to resemble where one comes from, is to allow oneself to be "re-created by and through a new context" without being compromised by the "cultural baggage and arrogance of the deferred centre." As a result, a revised way of being in conversation with the existing landscape allows it to erode one's identity. In the post-apartheid era in South Africa, it is easy to assign the escapist quality of the garden as a protective barrier of settler identity and as white privilege. This provides an opportunity for a different study as it is not the emphasis here. Wylie (2011:83) addresses the cultural and literary aspects of the garden and describes it as a "cultural artefact". When viewing the garden as a cultural artefact, it cannot be separated from cultural heritage and values. In this study, as in Wylie's (2011:82) discussion, the garden as part of colonial discourse is one way

of looking at the garden that influences perceptions thereof, but it is not the focus of this study. Instead, the focus is on the ecological aspect of the garden.

Longhurst (2006:588) further identifies that the use of native plants may be a result of people wanting low-maintenance gardens. According to Middleton (2015:255), this is indeed the case – she identifies low maintenance plants as the most important criterion for inclusion in South African gardens. Middleton (2015:255) continues that gardeners require a neat appearance and “a product of high quality with good garden performance”. Although what “good garden performance” means is not clearly explained, it does indicate that plants are expected to perform according to human requirements. According to Longhurst (2006:587), even when gardens claim to be low maintenance, they require time and labour and have cost implications. This is applicable not only for the instigation of a garden, but also in its maintenance.

The current interest in indigenous gardening can also be interpreted as being related to increased bioregional awareness. Bhatti (1999) argues that since the 1980s there has been an increase in the number of people concerned about the environment, and some gardeners are using indigenous or native plants with a view to returning landscapes to a more ‘natural’ form. Similarly, Ballard and Jones (2011:3) identify the suburban garden as a space for ecological conservation. In stark contrast with the garden as ecological, Ballard and Jones (2011:7) also refer to the ecological problematic around suburban gardens with “chemically sustained lawn and monotonous planting at the expense of indigenous flora [...]”. Such gardens are an ecological burden in opposition to the gardens that make an ecological contribution. Instead, Ballard and Jones (2011:8) suggest that the ecological garden requires an intimacy between the gardener, the location of the garden, and plants belonging to that place. Indigenous and native plants therefore form a crucial aspect of the ecological garden.

2.1.3 *Plant blindness*

The term plant blindness was coined in 1998 and was defined by two botanists James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler (2001:3) as the “inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment”. Wandersee and Schussler (2001:5, 6) draw a link between seeing and knowing and the impact cultural value systems have on how humans perceive plants, which holds interests for me. The implication is that seeing is directly linked to appreciating, which in relation to plants is the inability to appreciate their unique presence as a life form. Wandersee and Schussler’s (2001) campaign is focussed on gaining interest in plants as a

subject of study amongst the public to develop a greater understanding for a diverse range of plants.

Wandersee and Schussler (2001:3) discuss how, even though plants are studied extensively for their medicinal and agricultural value, studying plants as sentient beings have been a lesser priority than studying animals as can be seen in the comparison between the established field of animal studies while critical plant studies is still emerging (Aloi 2012:17). According to Michael Marder (2013:3), this is based on the lack of human kinship with plants where “[...] we fail to detect the slightest resemblances to our life in them and, as a consequence of this failure, routinely pass a negative judgement on their worth [...]”. Wandersee and Schussler (2001:3) also recognise the failure to connect with plants because their time scale and activity differ greatly from that of animals. Some people manufacture kinship through anthropomorphism, whereby plants are attributed with human characteristics, but according to Salwa (2014:319), treating plants as subalterns for whom we should speak carries its own risks, such as ignoring what plants are actually communicating and imposing human thought and needs onto vegetation. Marder (2013) argues we should acknowledge plants as ‘other’, but recognise that this does not mean they do not possess agency. We should also acknowledge our reliance on the botanical world for sustenance and pleasure. In other words, we should care for them, respect their time, processes of growth and so forth. When we have to use plants, we should not treat them as something whose existence is solely justified by our consumption. To overcome plant blindness is to view plants not as food, ornament or medium, but as responsive beings. Salwa (2014:319) suggests that we enter into dialogue with plants instead of making assumptions about what they are and what they need. I argue that cultivating gardens has the potential to lead to such a dialogue, where plants can be heard.

2.2 Paradoxical relationships in the garden

The source of the human difficulty of appreciating plants as having agency is based on a widely-held belief that humans are separate from, and dominate nature. This belief is rooted in Cartesian dualism where the mind is believed to be separate from and superior to the body. The Cartesian subject emphasises rational thought and values knowledge as objective scientific and mathematically determined fact, which is perceived to be indisputable as opposed to subjective disputable aspects of the material world (Latour 2004:9; Riley-Taylor 2002:34). The rational mind is believed to be dominant, and all that cannot be associated with the rational mind is seen as an objectified ‘other’. In the Cartesian view, it is believed that the rational mind sets humans apart from other species, and the ‘other’ is viewed as

something to be dominated and civilised (Riley-Taylor 2002:34). Humans are viewed as possessing culture, while that which does not form part of this culture and everything it produces is perceived as objects, while the rest is material for human use and manipulation; this results in the culture/nature dualism. This dualist way of thinking is so integrated in the Western epistemological tradition that humans constitute their identity as the dominant species and venerate this uniquely human characteristic. Part of this ability to 'know' objectively requires the simplification and even abstraction of the 'other' being studied to its simplest form in order to see it clearly. Spirn (1997:251) opposes the practice of abstracting, using the concept of nature as an example to demonstrate the problematic aspects thereof. For Spirn (1997:251), the term 'nature' is used to describe such a wide variety of beings and phenomena that it degrades its complexity and strips it of any agency. Beings and conditions as diverse as rocks, weather patterns and non-human animals are lumped together and homogenised as the same thing.

When applying the dualistic view to the garden, the gardener is the subject and the garden is seen as an object that can be used and manipulated at will or whim. This results in the view of the garden as a cultural achievement. According to Salwa (2013:373), the garden cannot be described without referring to nature or culture. Whereas the conventional view of the garden is firmly anthropocentric, changing the perspective slightly may produce a different understanding. Using relational *ways of thinking*¹³ such as ANT and the aesthetics of care that focus on connection rather than dualism or separation, plants in the garden are viewed as active participants and contributors, while humans are displaced from the centre as the only controlling force. In this study, the domineering relationship between the gardener and the plants in her garden is reconfigured. The garden can be described as paradoxical because the conventional view of it as dominated by the gardener is deeply embedded in western anthropocentric thinking; yet the experience of the garden shows a different relationship between the garden and all its constituents.

I further argue that based on the perceived division between nature and culture, human presence is understood as contaminating to nature. According to Power (2005:41), garden literature perpetuates the idea of human action as 'unnatural'. In this view, everything artificial spoils nature. It is in examining this binary that we see how nature as 'other' is conferred with characteristics such as wild and sublime; this, according to the stance I take

¹³ Proponents of ANT are adamant that it is not a theory. The term *ways of thinking* explain the desire of both ANT and aesthetics of care to reconfigure the human way of thinking from dualistic to a relational mode more clearly.

in this research, needs to be reviewed if we are to see humans as part of nature (Cronon 1996). Throughout this study, I offer evidence that domestic gardens are paradoxical spaces that trouble binary thinking, as Longhurst (2006:581) suggests. The garden then becomes the workshop or “laboratory” as Salwa (2014:318) proposes, where we can observe “[...] a spectrum of aesthetic and ethical issues” related to the relationship between nature and culture which is most visible in the way the gardener and the plants react to one another. One example is how the gardener chooses to prune the garden either in neat shapes for aesthetic purposes or, pruning to stimulate growth in order to benefit the plant. I argue that a relational approach and relational theories such as ANT and Donovan’s (2016) aesthetics of care are helpful in destabilising the power imbalance between binary relationships, and provide evidence for a shift from a dualist approach to a relational approach between humans and nature. This study therefore views nature and culture as connected, without reducing their complexity or differences.

Hitchings (2003:103) describes relationships in the garden as “ephemeral and precarious”. These shifting relationships relate to the movement of power between the actors as they enlist each other in their own strategies. Enlisting or soliciting others affects the strategies of various actors in the garden to enable collaboration (Power 2005:42). For example, the aesthetic qualities of a plant may solicit a person, tempting her to include the plant in her garden. A person’s decision on where to place the plant is based on the needs of the plant. If the plant requires full sun, the gardener must plant it in an appropriate sunny spot. There may be specific soil or watering requirements which may inadvertently affect the surrounding plants. These decisions are dictated by the plant’s requirements rather than the gardener’s. While the gardener enlists the aesthetic qualities of the plant to enhance her garden, the plant enlists the care of the gardener. According to Power (2005:50), this view of domestication becomes a relationship where plant and the gardener must adopt a co-operative relationship. But in identifying the agency of plants, they can be viewed as subjects in the garden, therefore destabilising the subject/object binary. When using ANT as a framework for viewing the garden, Hitchings (2003:102) raises the point that the embodied experience of physical things that surround humans, influences human perceptions as much as existing or preconceived ideas about these things.

2.2.1 Actor network theory (ANT) as a way of thinking that destabilises binary relationships

From an ANT perspective, human perceptions and understanding are influenced and shaped by the things that surround them. What makes a discussion of ANT difficult is that it is always case specific and particular (Law 2007:7). No two situations are the same and

there are no guiding principles on how to apply ANT, but that is exactly the point. For some this places the emphasis on practice, rather than theory, which is critiqued as a weakness as an over emphasis on 'doing' creates the risk to perpetuate the dichotomy between knowing and doing. The most important aspect for this study, however, is the idea that there is no single dominating actor and the human is decentred (Latour 1996:375).

ANT is used to examine power relationships between different elements or actors of a network. A network is a collection of actors that interact with and affect each other as part of a construct (Law 2007:8). An actor is an entity, which can be living, non-living, human or non-human, who is part of a network and can affect the outcome of a network. The actors are connected to each other by affecting each other and constituting the network (Latour 1996:376). The network can be open, which means that any actor can exit or enter at any time, which in turn affects the relationships within the network. ANT acknowledges that all things within a network have the potential for equal power, and each affects the other by demonstrating resistance or intent. The allocation of agency to both the human and non-human, redistributes power between them rather than allocating it to the dominant binary (Power 2005:42). Agency is assigned to an entity's ability to enrol other actors into certain desirable behaviours. Hinchings (2003:100) offers the closest to a simple definition of ANT saying that in ANT "[...] people, objects, plants, animals and ideas all jostle against each other, and it is through these interactions that society takes shape and our understandings of this society find form."

Power relationships between actors continually shift, and no one actor is constantly in power. The network can therefore be described as relational because of the shifting power relationships. Because of the dynamic relationship between actors, the resulting power relationships are temporary and unstable. As a result, binaries such as subject/object are re-evaluated and reviewed. According to Power (2005:43):

ANT's strength is founded in its recognition that categories, such as agency, identity, power and difference, are relational achievements that are 'spun' between sets of heterogeneous actors [...] non-human animals and other material aspects of the world, previously relegated to a passive 'nature', can be recognised as active and performing agency.

Hinchings (2003:100) further explains that ANT is conscious of the embodied experience of things where each thing can only be perceived partially and cannot be understood as a whole. There is no single dominating actor and the human is decentred. This is described by Law (2007:15), who states that "[w]ebs may be partially associated in endless different ways

but the need for a centre has gone". As mentioned previously, in ANT there is no distinction between human and non-human actors who have equal agency to develop identity in relation to each other. Law (2007:1) insists that it is not a theory, but rather an investigation of experience and practice in the form of case studies.

For Latour (2011), agency is a power expressed by all material bodies. Collectives and individuals, human and non-human are included amongst these material things. On this point there is a strong overlap between ANT and thing-power materialism. Although both humans and things fall under the classification of the material, there is still a clear distinction between things and humans. However, according to Bennett (2004:360-361), they do occasionally exchange properties. In thing-power materialism agency takes the form of 'resistance' and the demonstration of will. The human, being enlisted by the plant, ensures that all the conditions are favourable for it and that all its needs are met. The argument in both ANT and thing-power materialism is that power is always provisional, and the network demands continual maintenance in order not to come apart. In ANT, power is contestable and reversible, much in line with phenomenology, but for ANT this theory is not radical enough to cause a shift away from being human-centred. According to Bennett (2004:365), establishing a relationship based on equal power between humans and non-human things will encourage a more conscious engagement with them that could result in "wise-use".

2.2.2 Aesthetics of care as ethical representation of the plant as 'other'

The aesthetics of care is included in this study to further destabilise the dualistic perceptions of the garden. In a relationship of care, the carer gives up her power in order to take the needs of another being into consideration. A formative theorist of aesthetics of care is Donovan (2016). The understanding of the aesthetics of care in this study is as a theory that can be used to change the dominating behaviour of humans towards non-human nature to an inclusive and caring approach. This will be done by visualising a relationship of care between individual plants and the gardener that reveal mutual affections. To this end, Donovan (2016:10) alludes to "ecofeminist theories of care as offering the most promising reconceptualisations of our relationship with the nonhuman natural world". The aesthetics of care proposes that knowledge is based on specific contexts and relationships rather than a disconnected, universalised or abstract knowledge that views humans as disembodied and autonomous. The specific context and relationships destabilise the idea that human beings can transcend their environment or be severed from their context to fabricate generalised ideas of what things ought to be. This results in a misshapen perspective of non-human nature as, for example 'pure' or 'authentic' and an unwillingness to engage with other beings

that may challenge existing ideas. When immersed in and connected to a context, human beings have to concede the influence of other beings on them, and cannot consider themselves to be in charge of non-human nature. The aesthetics of care proposes the decentring of the human as the first step towards connecting to the non-human 'other' as subject (Donovan 2016:9).

Being attentive to the needs of another is a core mode of care. Whilst being attentive, self-interest shifts to the background and attention is fixed on that being cared for. To be able to identify the needs of the subject of care, the carer views the subject as it is, without any preconceived ideas of what should be, but out of genuine interest. For Donovan (2016:8), being attentive means "suspending imaginative constructs", which emphasises the unique, different and particular aspects of a subject, instead of reducing the plant to an object for ideological or aesthetic manipulation that perpetuate the disconnected, universalised views of knowledge and ethics mentioned previously. Being attentive reveals variances and differences between 'objects' that are lumped together under abstract principles and generalisations based on mind-nature dualism, encouraging awareness of their subjectivity. According to Donovan (2016:10), the recognition of non-human nature as subject results in a caring rather than an exploitative relationship wherein humans are attentive and respectful towards non-human lifeforms. This philosophy fosters an ethic of care that avoids domination and exploitation (Donovan 2016:6). Donovan (2016:2-3, 10) asserts that the aesthetics of care will pave the way for a more ethical and caring attitude towards non-human nature, "to help humans compensate for the legacy of the mind-nature dualism". The aesthetic component of care comes into consideration in representations of non-human nature. An attentive attitude towards the aesthetic representation of non-human nature should initiate a caring attitude towards it, encouraging the same behaviour from readers and viewers. Thus, an attentive attitude by artists toward their subject matter should perpetuate a caring approach from those who engage with the subject.

In a critique of the aesthetics of care, Aretoulakis (2014:176-177) bases care on one of two approaches: one either identifies with the subject of care, or one is fascinated with the subject as alien. For Aretoulakis (2014:176), the first is problematic because it bears traces of anthropomorphism, while the latter should be dealt with by distancing oneself from the subject of care in order not to contaminate it. Bennett (2004), on the other hand, encourages care because of the resulting emotional connection that embraces being part of non-human nature, as opposed to standing over it. Aretoulakis (2014:177) opposes this view in favour of distance from and non-interference with non-human nature. Perhaps Aretoulakis' strong opposition to interference, even in the form of care, in favour of distance, just replaces one

universal abstracted idea with another. The interaction between care, anthropomorphism and distance become very complex in practice where each plays a role in forming a connection with a plant. George Gessert's¹⁴ (2002:29) relationship with the irises he has bred for more than three decades for his iris projects reveals how these interrelate. For Gessert (2002:30), caring for something means kinship, which is based on similarity, or to recognise oneself in the other. On the other hand, he also admits his intrigue with the "strangeness" of plants (Gessert 2002:32). Donovan (2006:321, 305) identifies that humans also need to recognise that the non-human has its own nature that must be considered, engendering a conversation based on attentiveness to the subject that is cared for. The nature of care theory is therefore dialogical.

2.3 Artists who use the garden as artistic trope for ecological intervention

Because it is so difficult to relinquish the idea of nature as a neat construct, Wolfe (2010) and Morton (2010) draw on the arts to visualise an ecology without nature. Donovan (2016:9) also turns to the arts to find evidence of expressions of care based on her belief that art and literature have the ability to present one with a perspective of another. These authors contend that products of the artistic imagination have the ability to influence fundamental thinking in the viewer, by offering alternative views to their day to day perceptions which are founded on binary thinking. I argue that the sculptural installation based on paradoxical relationships in the garden can be viewed as an ecological intervention. These interventions place emphasis on destabilised conventional power relationships in the garden. Local and international artists use elements of the garden and its format as point of departure to explore how the garden changed the perception of the relationship between people and plants to thereby enhance ecological awareness. Discussions in this chapter indicate that a shift in the human relationship with other things in our ecology is necessary to preserve the human species. To this end, humans need to be considerate in all their engagements with non-human lifeforms. Theorists such as Wolfe, Latour, Morton and Donovan believe that the arts will pave the way for this shift because of their performative capacity.

¹⁴ Admittedly, Gessert is a rather contentious figure to include in this study because a few of his views contrast starkly with some of the views in this research. Gessert views his plants solely as a medium to work with, and his intent is to breed plants with the most attractive form; he is, nonetheless, relevant owing to his practice of a relationship between plants and people.

One way of approaching ecological themes in art is using anthropocentric themes to draw attention to ecological concerns and evoke emotional responses (Krajewska 2017:47). Dark ecology suggests an alternative approach. Instead of focusing on human action as detrimental to the ecology, human inter-connectedness and relationships with the non-human, whether symbiotic or conflictual, should be emphasised. Alongside this approach, the process of making art can be likened to the desired ecological state. During the process of making, the artist, in an attentive state, is so intently focussed on the subject, mediums and material that everything else, including the artist herself, becomes a lesser concern. The artist is decentred and intently focussed on another.

Claire Jorgensen, a South African artist interested in the relationship between humans, garden systems and indigenous and non-indigenous plant growth, created an installation titled *Waterblommetjies* (2010) (Figure 4). Jorgensen plots changing perceptions of nature by referencing Monet's *Waterlilies* in a contemporary installation version. The work is from the *Ice Flower* series and consists of frozen black ink flowers cast from the local waterlily on a bed of ice in a refrigerated area. The flowers gradually melt and spill onto the ice, in the artist's view contaminating its pristine quality. In referring to Monet's *Waterlilies*, Jorgensen (2010:sp) aims to draw attention to "a modernist vision where nature is existing in unity to humankind, with a utopic optimism that celebrates the changing environment". In its place, her adaptation visualises the "21st century [...] fear of an environment changing beyond our understanding and control" (Jorgensen 2010:sp).



Figure 4: Claire Jorgensen, *Waterblommetjies*, 2010. Ice, ink, refrigerated bed. Dimensions variable. (Jorgensen 2012:sp).

Gerda Steiner and Jorgen Lenzlinger, an artistic duo located in Switzerland, take a similar approach to the construction of their artworks, such as in *Falling Garden* (2003) (Figure 5). This installation consists of several objects ranging from trash they picked up in the street, items collected from their travels, growing crystals and artificial flowers and berries suspended from the ceiling of the church of San Eustachio in Venice. These form a colourful cloud over a daybed where viewers are invited to take off their shoes and view the installation lying down. Frauenfelder (2006:29) describes how the artists treat all objects in this installation, whether trash or living thing, exactly the same. Combining these familiar yet disparate objects that occupy opposite ends of the scale from a Cartesian perspective, and recontextualising them in relation to each other, might mean that we view them as part of the same entity. All these dissimilar components form part of a single installation that revises the conventional hierarchy of things. The intermingling and juxtaposing of manufactured, found and formed items suspended together, initiates the perception that their origin matters less than their presence. In the state of immersion, the viewer may experience that neither human presence nor nature form the central axis around which the installation revolves. This does not mean that there is no centre, but rather that the centre is continually shifting and fleeting in relation to networks or assemblages.



Figure 5: Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, *Falling Garden*, 2003. Installation view, Church of San Eustachio on the Grand Canal, 50th Venice Biennial. Found objects. Dimensions variable. (Frauenfelder 2006:28).

Tomás Saraceno, an Argentinian installation artist, uses his background in architecture to reimagine what it means to be human in relation to the environment. He re-envision architecture as nomadic and airborne platforms for ecological living in, as opposed to the multitude of buildings that encrust the earth's surface, replacing the vegetation that once grew there (Figure 6). These floating structures not only aim to physically lighten the load on the planet's surface, but also to question deeply-rooted cultural practices such as agriculture and the need for permanence and ownership that determine the way humans interact with the planet. He poses his structures as an alternative, not only to live on, but also to generate a new lifestyle. Thomas (2007:1) describes Saraceno's aspiration to "unlearn, implying the stripping away of these basic shared assumptions about how we live, tracing backwards from the perceived limits of what is culturally possible in order to carve out new visions for living." Saraceno envisions this new lifestyle as nomadic and light, taking from earth only what is needed. His approach is playful and encourages questions about how we live on the planet. Johnson's (2009:62) review quotes Saraceno: "utopia exists until it is made". According to Johnson (2009:62), this forms a vital paradox in Saraceno's work. Therefore, "[b]y giving free and joyful expression to his fantastical desires [...] he sweeps the audience into his shambolic optimism and spotlights important questions: how do we really change our minds?" (Johnson 2009:62).



Figure 6: Tomás Saraceno, *32SW/Stay Green/Flying Garden/Air-Port-City*, 2007. Installation view, self-sustainable greenhouse equipped with an irrigation system. Dimensions variable. (Walker Art 2009:sp).

In a series of works titled *Garden of Words* (1982-present) (Figure 7), South African artist Willem Boshoff realises an attentive relationship with plants. The work has taken on different forms during his art career, and each of these iterations form a memorial piece for plant

species on the brink of extinction. In its third iteration, titled *Garden of Words III*, the names (botanical and vernacular) and native country of 15 000 species are printed on white handkerchiefs. Boshoff recorded these names himself over 25 years, and continues to do so (Gentric [Sa]:5). According to Boshoff (2012:sp), the handkerchiefs point to “abjection and vulnerability.” This iteration of the work continues Boshoff’s fascination with naming things and using language to shape identity. However, the words alone will not have the desired impact and instead of pages, they are visualised as a sort of graveyard for vegetation verging on extinction in a way that resembles the commemoration of soldiers who died in various ideological struggles.



Figure 7: Willem Boshoff, *Garden of Words III*, 1982-present. Printed handkerchiefs, plastic stands. Dimensions variable. (Boshoff 2012:sp).

Urban Wetlands (2012) (Figure 8), an interactive installation by Jenna Burchell, is constructed to mimic a field of reeds that slowly lights up like a building with the presence of its occupants. These lights dim down again as viewers move away. In this manner, visitors can weave an illuminated path through the installation, playing with their presence in the field (Burchell 2012:sp). The effects of urbanisation on people is another theme explored in *Urban Wetlands*. According to Burchell (2012:sp), the reeds mimic a common species, *Equistum telmatei braunii*, an extreme invader in South Africa also known as ‘snake grass’. Snake grass has a vast root system that could span kilometres underground, invading and destroying the natural ecosystem (Burchell 2012:sp). Burchell (2012:sp) further explains that the

intention of the installation is to create awareness of human immersion in nature and that comes with the responsibility to be accountable. A parallel is drawn between the invasiveness of the weeds and the buildings people build, and equally, to the damage they cause. The naturalness of the weeds is questioned and the buildings are likened to weeds, or weeds to buildings. The work is an exploration of effects between various actors, and without distinguishing between what is good and what is bad for the environment, moral judgement is set aside.



Figure 8: Jenna Burchell. *Urban Wetlands*. 2012. Interactive installation, Aluminium, LED, wood, custom circuitry, Dimensions variable. (Burchell 2012:sp).

The agency of plants in the garden, as outlined in ANT, is amplified in artworks such as Vaughn Bell's *Portable Environments* (2003) (Figure 9). These tongue-in-cheek works are an attempt to shift human-perception of plants as something to fill the background, to something with power and intention. *Portable Environments*, which consists of plants in shopping carts being transported by the artist to various places, aims to recast plants in a role that is participative and central rather than static and rooted. These works also bring 'nature' to spaces where it is not usually experienced, such as less affluent neighbourhoods. Although, as Ryan (2013:344) states, the plants are dependent on the artist to move them, the perception of their mobility destabilises the view of plants as fixed, and therefore by assumption, powerless. In *Personal Landscapes* (2005-2006), Bell continues with the theme of mobility, but by adding leashes to these small moss 'landscapes' on wheels, induces the affection one might feel for a small companion animal. This method elevates the status of

plants to the status of a pet, and Bell seems to pose the question: What would it be like if people cared as much for plants as they do for their companion animals? Both these works traverse conventional boundaries, not only between plant, animal and person, but also between larger hierarchical binaries such as nature and culture. Bell's artworks, consisting of several organic and human-made materials, do not belong to either nature or culture separately, but rather as an integrated subject.



Figure 9: Vaughn Bell, *Portable Environments*, 2003. Indoor and outdoor installations, public performance, video, shopping carts, soil, plant. Bakalar Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston, MA; outdoor installation at Mt. Ida College, Newton, MA. Dimensions variable. (Vaughn Bell [Sa]:sp).

Bell (in Ryan 2013:345-346) wants to connect people more intimately with cultured nature so they can experience with all their senses, not just visually. Bell created several biospheres for this purpose. With their heads stuck into biospheres such as *Metropolis* (2012) and *Village Green* (2015), viewers are confronted with plants at eye level. From this perspective, these terrariums reveal aspects that otherwise may have remained unnoticed. In trying to find common ground between people and plants, Ryan (2013:337) recalls Marder's theories on "plant thinking" to argue that even though plants are voiceless, they, just like humans, express themselves spatially and materially. Bell emphasises their spatial expression by suspending them in the air. Despite cautions against anthropomorphic treatment of plants by theorists such as Salwa (2013), Bell incorporates this approach in some of her work to emphasise the agency of plants.

Donna Kukama's *The Garden of Excuses* (Figure 10) exhibited in London consisted of a greenhouse structure with medicinal plants indigenous to South Africa. She envisioned plants as subjects that would enter and occupy homes in Britain, taking ownership of these spaces in an ironic form of colonisation (Kukama 2017:sp). The structure that housed the plants was operated as a shop where people could enter and discuss the ailments of their soul with the artist, who would in turn issue a South African plant as a remedy. The artist was the facilitator between the participants, and the plants offered hope in the form of treatment. Kukama (2017:sp) commented that this work affected her deeply because contrary to her previous performances, she spent more time listening than talking and found a healing power in her conversations. In addition to transforming the ideas of the participants, she found her own ideas transformed significantly.



Figure 10: Donna Kukama. *The Garden of Excuses*, 2017. Installation including greenhouse structure and South African plants. Frieze Projects, London. (Frieze [Sa]:[sp])

These artists use the garden or imagined formations thereof to engage with vegetation and rethink human-plant relationships in a way that considers vegetation as alive and responsive. Various methods such as enchantment (Jorgensen, Burchell and Steiner and Lenzlinger), irony (as in Bell's reimaginings of plants as things with personality that demand attention and Kukama's use of plants as remedy for ailments of the soul), memory (Boshoff's emphasis on memory of the already lost and potential loss of vegetative biodiversity), and Saraceno's escapist re-imaginings of the human place in ecology are

used. Each of these works highlight different aspects of human relationships to and dependence on plants.

In reconfiguring the garden in a way that reveals the anthropocentric foundations of conventional views thereof, and proposing a revised perspective of the garden as a place for investigating and adjusting human-plant relationships, I propose drawing attention to paradoxical relationships between culture and nature as closely connected and overlapping, rather than as contrasting phenomena. Using art practice to reveal the relational nature of practices such as domestication and cultivation normally associated with the ability of the human mind to control and dominate, I cast vegetation in a leading role alongside human actors. Using similar strategies to the artworks discussed in this chapter, I consider my artwork *The Paradoxical Garden* (2018) as an example that is ecological in intention in Chapters Three and Four.

CHAPTER THREE

CULTIVATING A RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE GARDEN THROUGH ART

3.1 Introduction

The sculptural installation *The Paradoxical Garden* (2018), created as the practical component of this study, relies on the creative process and artistic methods to destabilise anthropocentric views of the garden. In this chapter, I discuss how the process of cultivating and interacting with plants as part of the creative process directly impacted on the thinking and planning of the visual form of *The Paradoxical Garden*. Starting with an interest in plants, the sculptural installation developed to include performance, specifically in the form of care, and interest developed into relationships with the plants. As relationships with the actors in *The Paradoxical Garden* formed, the conceptualisation of the form of the installation evolved from an artist-centred vision to a collaborative vision. A responsive approach based on improvisation, as well as the care of the plants, was fundamental, and eventually became part of the creative process. The artistic process flowed out of the care of the plants, during which time they were domesticated. Throughout the development of the work, an existing relationship with plants as conventionally representative of 'nature', and their entanglement with culture and artifice, was noted and visualised. A collaborative artistic approach was adopted and related to the themes of nurture, cultivation and propagation, which are seen as joint processes between plants and people. This is evident in the shift from an artist's perspective to the involvement of the artist in a chain of actions and reactions to shape the artwork, rather than a predetermined course or vision of the outcome. Throughout the discussion, the 'messiness' of the process of interaction between living things and its unintended consequences, are made visible.

This chapter explores the intersections and disjunctions between the aesthetics of care and ANT and how they relate to ecological aims in *The Paradoxical Garden*. I argue that adopting a dialogical approach similar to the transaction between the gardener and the plants informs the creative process. The result is a more relational approach to art making, which could lead to an improved awareness of the agency of plants. Art making is related to the cultivation process; based on the premise in this study, both are aimed at enhancing growth and the wellbeing of its subjects, as well as those who experience it. To demonstrate this premise, I examine the creative process to identify similarities to the cultivation process where aspects of cultivating reveal how nature and culture are entangled in the garden.

According to Salwa (2014:321), even though cultivation occurs in the interest of humans, it considers nature as well. Plants were included in an aesthetic dimension, and this inclusion inevitably involved domestication. As a result, I maintain that the process of domestication is not necessarily only in the interest of people, but also beneficial to the species being domesticated. For example, Donna Haraway (2008:37) explores the relationship between humans and dogs, the oldest domesticated species, wherein dogs offer humans companionship and humans offer dogs physical care and emotional attention. The relationship between domesticated species and humans can, however, be controlling and abusive.

3.2. Art making as process of cultivation and immersion

My creative method was based on processes already used in the garden, such as co-creation, entanglement, care and preservation. Co-creation is evident in the experience of the garden as a collaboration between people, the elements (light, water, soil, minerals/nutrients, temperature, seasonal changes) and plants. These garden processes offer possible alternatives for an interaction between humans and plants; alternatives that are not only centred on human needs, as the needs of the plants are considered carefully to those of the humans. These creative processes are considered actions in opposition to non-action or careless action. The introduction of other living beings into the creative process substantially changed both my approach and the result of the creative process. According to Power (2005:39), each element affects the other through action and reaction. Descriptors such as 'organic', 'flexible', 'adaptable' and 'responsive' formed the foundation of my approach, which incidentally simulates plant-like characteristics. My approach was also underpinned by a continual search for balance between my needs and the needs of the individual plants, and between the plants in relation to the artist-gardener. I had to reconstruct my own conceptions of nature to resemble what Spirn (1997:260) describes as a relationship to non-human features and phenomena, which simultaneously recognises the active subjectivity of the non-human and the importance of the human imagination. By voluntarily or involuntarily adhering to the needs of the plants in the garden, the gardener can no longer be seen as a central figure who shapes and transforms nature. She is no longer the dominant owner of a garden that shapes nature at will, but rather someone who is connected to the plants in the garden.

The creative process involved intensive engagement with the subject matter, namely the garden, and in particular the plants. It comprised an attentive approach based on care. My lack of knowledge of gardens and plants meant that an exploratory attitude and intuitive responses were essential. Not having the prior knowledge of how plants should be treated

meant that my approach was more divergent as I did not have preconceived expectations. These limitations did, however, present themselves as I gained more knowledge. My artistic methods were based on learning to collaborate and converse with plants, which were visualised in artworks. My responses in the conversation often took the form of mimicry to highlight similarity, but also juxtaposition to amplify contrast. The conversations were documented on paper and film in various ways. For the care component, the documentation of conversation took place in my journals.

Immersion in the subject matter of *The Paradoxical Garden* is based on the careful observation, or “receptive contemplation” of the plants, as van Boeckel (2015:120) refers to it. Studying their behaviour reveals their needs and affords the artist-gardener the opportunity of exploring ways in which the plants can be tended to in the garden and other places such as greenhouses constructed by humans. Through attentive observation, changes in the appearance of the plant are noted and evaluated. I applied considerable effort to identify the root cause of any changes in the plants in order to mitigate drooping leaves or hardened soil. Morton (2011:165) argues that the full character of an object is withheld, as one can never understand the whole of any object as one can “never see the whole of it, and nothing else can either.” In this mode of immersion, familiar plants simultaneously become enchanting and demanding. Every action or reaction was an opportunity to learn more about the plant in order to better sustain it, albeit based on my personal interests. Ultimately, an enhanced understanding of the plant’s needs facilitated my ability to use and manipulate the plant as part of my installation.

Although I initiated my study as a result of personal interest, namely using the plants in an art installation, I was involved with and caring for their needs. My attentive state allowed me to notice details of the plants that I would not have done under different circumstances. For example, I noted whether the angle of the leaf in relation to the stem would allow me to attach something to it. Immersion can be described as a dream-like state wherein felt properties, not just seen properties, are also translated into the artwork. The act of perceiving with the intention to reproduce creates a different consciousness – one immerses oneself in the subject being re-created and walk away with a completely different understanding of that subject (Van Boeckel 2015:114). I also became aware that I am not the only creature affecting the plant. I studied the ways that insects interact with the plant, and was fascinated by how they destroy parts of a leaf while allowing it to remain alive. I noticed how they ate between the veins of the leaf, which made it possible for me to interact with the plant in a similar manner without harming it. I mimicked these insects by removing sections of the leaves for aesthetic effect, without destroying the plant.

The process of intense engagement with an object or living entity can be considered as a state of immersion that could lead to a state of defamiliarization with the subject matter. This involves studying the subject as if perceiving it anew so that the artist notices different aspects and possibilities, resulting in a changed understanding of that subject. The process relates to Donovan's (2016) subjectification where objects become subjects. In this study, engagement through visual exploration and observation of its properties, and the resultant actions and reactions, translate into a different view of the plant as object. Van Boeckel (2015:11) argues for the felt experience of a thing:

In the attentive state of mind of looking carefully at a plant and drawing its features, we may start to feel that it is the emerging leaf production region *itself*, which is showing us how to 'tune into' and 'swim with' the rapidly unfolding myriad of forms, each being a transformation of the one before [...]

In such a felt experience, the material and spatial presence of the plant intensifies, and its subjectivity is revealed.

3.3. Domestication

Domestication is usually linked to the human need to control and dominate, but is viewed in a different manner in this study. In the practice of care, I viewed the experience of domestication as a means to protect and enhance the well-being of a plant. The garden as domesticated nature is the culmination of both control and affection. For example, the French formal gardens of the 1800s were regarded as tamed, ordered version of 'wild' nature (Parsons 2008:115). These versions of the garden were a means to control the wildness of nature, and served to mediate between civilisation and wilderness. According to Longhurst (2006:585), gardens, when considered as a cultural achievement where the human hand 'improves' nature, are designed to provide pleasure for people. Yet, when viewing domestication from the perspective of ANT, recognising the enrolled status of the 'dominant' human being, and how the domesticated subject benefits from this arrangement, one may realise that it is a process that is beneficial to both the domesticator and domesticated. As domestication requires significant human intervention, the perception of this interference as only contaminating is questioned.

Two of my artworks that informed this realisation are *Tamed* and *Remains*. As I became more confident in caring for plants, I decided to source them responsibly from patches of land marked for development in order to include more variation in my selection of plants. I saw this as a process of domestication rather than adoption, and caring for these plants involved a more intuitive approach as they came without a label or care instructions. These

plants were collected from the wild, yet their domestication yielded the most dramatic and most visible results of all the plants. The response to care in the case of domesticated plants is significant. They either thrived or died under care. With *Tamed*, I documented how the *Crassula* grew lush and its colour more vibrant under my care – even producing another plant from a dropped leaf. In my endeavour to provide for its needs, I shifted from providing too little to providing too much water. As a result of ‘over-care’, the plant attracted aphids and mealie bugs, who both love the tenderness of new growth, and I had to adjust my care regime to provide less water. Therefore, the pests helped me realise that the still-unidentified *Crassula* requires minimal care. The growth, flowering and even decay of some parts of the plant were documented in the journal created for *Tamed* (Figure 11.)



Figure 11: Marili de Weerd and unidentified *Crassula*, *Tamed*, 2018. Plywood, wood, glue, nails, paper, thread, watercolour, ink, plastic, wire, rock, 132 x 480 x 25 cm. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

Remains is a result of care gone wrong, reaffirming the idea that human interference is harmful to plants. In the process of domestication, I was unable to identify the needs of this particular plant. I was careful not to smother it, knowing that it came from a very dry environment. I initially neglected it to simulate its original conditions, and later tried to be more involved, but the plant, later identified as *Pelargonium alchemilloides*, could not adapt what it was trying to communicate to me in relation to my erratic responses. I wanted to put the evidence of my efforts together, and tried to reconstruct the dead plant in a frame using thread and attempted to set it using bio-resin. I displayed it with a journal of my unsuccessful attempts to identify and respond to its needs (Figure 12). This is an example of miscommunication between myself and a plant. During the process of creating these works,

it became evident that human interference in the form of domestication in *The Paradoxical Garden* can be both beneficial and detrimental to the well-being of plants.



Figure 12: Marili de Weerdt and *Pelargonium alchemilloides* (L.) L'Hér, *Remains*, 2018. Plywood, wood, glue, nails, paper, thread, bio-resin, watercolour, ink, plastic, wire, 144 x 63 x 50 cm. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

3.3.1. *Experiential knowledge*

Before adopting, collecting and taming plants, I considered them in aesthetic terms, and created several sketches imagining what a creative collaboration with plants might look like (Figure 13). In these sketches I considered the visual aspects of plants, instead of their capacities as living beings. There was a disjoint between what I would have liked to achieve and the reality of using living plants. When I then started to collect and care for plants, I had to revise my initial visions. During my interaction with plants, I realised that the imagined form of the garden is not executable as it did not consider the welfare of the plants in the long term. The first of the plans lacked both water and soil, two things without which most plants cannot survive, while the second included conditions such as enclosed containers in which plants will not survive for long.



Figure 13: Marili De Weerdt, Planning sketches for *The Paradoxical Garden*, 2017. Photograph by the author.

My lack of knowledge about plants was a clear limitation in realising their potential as a medium.¹⁵ My first impulse was to dominate and control them as in the anthropocentric approach this study condemns. In search for information to support my aims, despite the abundance of discussions on the conditions different species of plants prefer, what size one can expect them to grow to, the colour of their flowers and how to propagate them, I could not find information about how they would act in my planned artwork. Based on my initial planning, this information was only partially useful as I needed to find out what their limits are, and how I could manipulate their growth to realise my creative vision. I discussed my 'requirements' with various experts (which I elaborate on in Chapter Four), but often their responses were that I would have to experiment. They were able to advise regarding the plants that would display the properties I required. Once I acquired the plants, I embarked on a process of discovery whereby I assisted the plant through attending to water, soil and light requirements. Throughout, I documented my engagements with the plants to ascertain where I was aiding or restricting their growth and flourishing. I learned through experience, and built up a tacit knowledge about each plant and its needs, as a mother would tend to her children. An emotional bond developed between me and the plants that I cared for.

¹⁵ At this point, I still viewed plants as a medium. I only realised the extent of their agency in the process of experiential attentiveness. Learning of plants using experiential attentiveness means that I gained knowledge from observing them intently in order to provide the necessary care for them to flourish. It is a physical experience of looking, touching and even smelling the plant to determine its current condition.

In gaining a better understanding of the plants, I had to revise my initial plans to be less stressful and harmful. I started knowing the plants through what Donovan (2016:73) calls “experiential attentiveness”, which she locates as the preferred method to interact with all living beings instead of attempting to master and control the plants as in the Cartesian approach. As I engaged with the plants and tried to realise aspects of my vision, the plants asserted their views through their responses, often in unpredictable ways which were not coherent with my vision. For example, as I twisted and tangled the branches of an adopted *Mondia whitei*, to form *Tapestry*, (Figure 19 on page 53), at every downward turn the plant threw off its leaves, and new growth appeared at the top of the loop. With this behaviour, the plant made its intention clear that the only direction it wished to grow was upward. The plant’s intention could not be ignored, and in order to consider its needs, I no longer bent its branches downward. I acknowledged its agency, and in response changed my behaviour. In the dualistic relationship between subject and object, the object is a docile recipient of the subject’s will. It was clearly not the case in this instance. The *Mondia whitei* and I were partners working together, and in this instance the binary relationship between the human as subject and the plant as object was destabilised. One can deduce, in agreement with Donovan (2016:73), that such an attentive approach contests dualism and the subject/object binary in particular.

Viewing art as an embodied engagement with materials is complicated by working with living things; I refer to my studio space as *The Shed* (Figure 14). Inside it, my creative process, divergent exploration and experimentation leading to the creation of *The Paradoxical Garden* is made accessible. In garden terms, the process and tools usually remain hidden to conceal human interference and enhance the experience of the garden as natural. My studio space therefore contains everything leading up to *The Paradoxical Garden*, including ideas previously explored and pursued, as well as the parts of the process that did not deliver results. This space should provide insight into thought processes behind the work, points of departure and influences, as well as failed attempts and unsuccessful explorations. The process is displayed as part of the work to indicate the complexity of the process of working with living things and the challenges in retaining their subjectivity. From this perspective, *The Shed* is strewn with evidence of failed attempts to sustain living things, indicating the things left in the wake of the process. The creative process in this study, which is entangled with care, can be described as ‘messy’, and even in some instances harmful to the plant subjects incorporated.

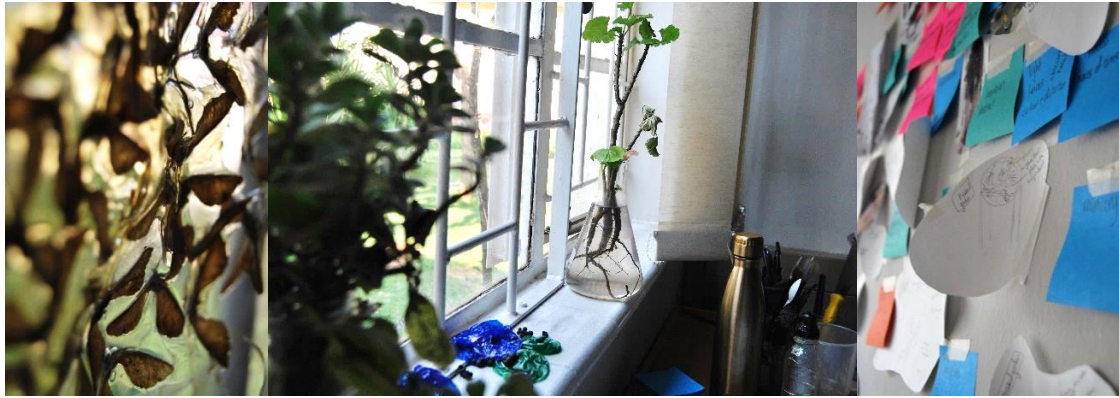


Figure 14: Marili De Weerd, detail of *The Shed*, 2018. Studio space and art tools and materials. Photograph by the author.

The process of domestication and cultivation forms the foundation for a creative critical enquiry into existing relationships in *The Paradoxical Garden*, where the relationship between humans and plants is questioned and reimagined. Imagination and artistic creativity have an important role to play in the posthumanist agenda to alter perceptions about human and non-human relationships (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007:176). The resulting artistic interpretation of the garden proposes to encourage viewers to respond with increasing care towards cultured-natural vegetation. Considering the current ecological crisis, a sensitive orientation towards plants may encourage more responsible pro-environmental behaviours (Bhatti & Church 2001:380). For Dorothea Von Hantelmann (2010:10-11), the performative function of art in an exhibition format creates an opportunity for perceptions to change, which is the strength of art as a cultural format. In documenting and exhibiting the process of involvement with plants, *The Paradoxical Garden* presents an alternative view and experience of the garden and the plants therein as subjects. To enable living as part of the non-human environment, humans need to gain a better understanding of all the actors in this network. The practice-led process emphasises that gaining experience and knowledge by doing allows information to reveal itself, as opposed to a quest to expose it (Aretoulakis 2014:173). Thus the practice-led process allowed for an embodied and intimate interaction with non-human nature through seeking ways to collaborate with plants. My enhanced understanding of the entanglement of human and non-human is in turn revealed through the artworks. This interconnection is visualised in my practice by using journals as a documentation of interactions, and conversation between people and plants as subjects who can mediate interaction with non-human nature.

3.4. The Aesthetics of Care

Interest in another being based on care initiated a different approach to my creative process. I argue in this study that care distinguishes domestication from a one-sided domineering experience, and transforms it into a conversation where both the domesticator and the domesticated are altered. As a result of being enlisted by the properties of, in this case a plant, care can be defined as the attentive engagement with another in order to identify and tend to their needs. In my art practice, the creative process is determined on the basis of care. An ethic of care establishes the boundaries within which creative play can take place to ensure all participants are considered. In a relationship of care, power relationships shift between participants. Although I maintain that the garden can be seen as a network, following ANT, one cannot remove care from the network. In caring for a plant, it is important to note that care is not reciprocated. Needs are identified using observation and documentation, which form an integral part of getting to know the plant and its needs. Needs are then tended to and visualised as care systems to show how human interference or intervention can be beneficial. Instances where interference has not been beneficial to the plants are also acknowledged. In my body of work *Care* (2018), plant behaviour and participation were documented and visualised with the aim of encouraging realisation of their agency.

As a body of work, *Care* resulted from the high demand of the process of caring for the plants that is integral to my installation. To keep plants alive and healthy as part of the process of creating was essential, and dominated the first part of my process as I gained the knowledge and experience of the plants. Caring for these plants required an emotional connection that allowed me to regard the needs of others, using a combination of knowledge and intuition. This means moving between a self-centred state and a plant-centred state. Care enables interference, and in the relationship between people and plants, intervention is perceived as artificial. Irrigation systems and adding fertiliser to a plant, for example, are part of this artificial system that supports the garden. From the perspective of deep ecology, this is contaminating. Many animals such as beavers build homes for themselves using natural resources. In some instances, these cause severe damage to the environment as they build, but they are not considered contaminating or unnatural. In *The Paradoxical Garden*, instead of hiding this contaminating or 'artificial' component, it is displayed to visualise the relational paradigm of the garden.



Figure 15: Marili de Weerd and *Pellaea calomelanos* (Sw.) Link, *Waterworks*, 2018. Plywood, wood, glue, nails, thread, plastic, wire, fertiliser, cinnamon, paper, watercolour, ink, mealie bugs, aphids, 158 x 25 x 33 cm. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

The decision to work with living plants was an exciting prospect, and taking care of them provided me with much pleasure; nonetheless, at times it felt like a burden. The sense of responsibility stifled my creative process. The prospect of creative experimentation was replaced by testing ways to keep the plants alive, and observing their reactions to attempt to act quickly at any signs of discontent. This caused frustration and dampened my creativity. Before I could explore the creative potential of working with plants, I had to understand their needs. *Waterworks*, which is based on a small fern collected from the wild later identified as a *Pellaea calomelanos*, was one of the most demanding plants I worked with. It seemed fairly happy with being domesticated, but I struggled to keep up with its demand for water. I found it¹⁶ wilted and dried on a regular basis. Every time I watered it, it recovered quickly and replaced the branch that had dried out. This plant seemed very finicky and it required a greater support system than the others, but was equally resilient. In addition to its deman-

¹⁶ Throughout this study, references to the plant as 'it' should not be confused with the use of it in description of an object, but rather that the plant is genderless.

ding behaviour towards me, it also did not enjoy the close company of other plants. To avoid them, its leaves grew in several different directions in order to prevent coming in close proximity or direct contact with the other plants; consequently, it looked misshapen. I spent a bit of time trying to identify it and found it online. This plant's higher care demand in comparison with the others becomes evident in the amount of water and other duties it required. It also needed weekly cleaning to remove bugs, and I sprinkled it with cinnamon as an anti-fungal treatment because the very moist conditions it likes to grow in are ideal breeding grounds for fungus. The format of the notes for this work was different because I required constant reminding to tend to it, so I stuck notes on the wall as reminders to myself (see Figure 15). The high demand for care lead me to characterise it as a diva who constantly insists on being the centre of attention. This was confirmed with an internet search that indicated that this plant cannot be moved once established. This proved to be true of many other plants and not just this particular one.

During the process of care, as exchanges occurred between the artist-gardener and the plants, my ideas and relationship with many of the plants changed. I intuitively tried to communicate these relationships using watercolour sketches with a more detail to signify intrigue and involvement. I changed the saturation of the colours to show attraction and interest, and physical distance from the plant to indicate affection and association. This was most drastic in two of the plants I cared for as I gained knowledge about them through engagement and research. Initially, I had very little knowledge of plants and different species. I was attracted to plants based on their appearance in relation to my taste. For this reason, the *Lantana camara* caught my attention based on the colour combination of its flowers, which reminded me of a sunset. I discovered two small stray¹⁷ *Lantana*'s growing on the side of the road and collected them, initially not knowing what type of plant it is. I cared for them alongside all the others. In time I tried to identify all my plants (those that came without a label), mostly by conversing with gardeners, nursery assistants and landscape architects. In a conversation with my mother (a gardener), she indicated that the description fitted that of a *Lantana*, which is classified as a weed. I came to understand that this species is a particularly aggressive weed and quite damaging to the South African ecology (Nel 2015:iii). I was horrified that I had perpetuated their growth and stopped caring for them immediately. The two plants died and I threw them away. Where I had initially admired their colours, I now perceived the *Lantana camara* as threatening (Figure 16.)

¹⁷ A stray is a plant that has seeded or developed a shoot in a place it is not supposed to grow.



Figure 16: Marili de Weerd, *Lantana camara*, 2018.
Fabriano paper, watercolour, ink, 23 x 80 cm.
Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

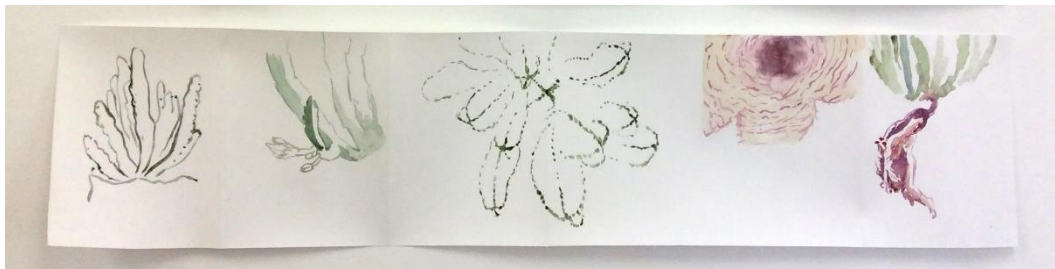


Figure 17: Marili de Weerd, *Stapelia grandiflora*, 2018.
Fabriano paper, watercolour, ink, 23 x 80 cm.
Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

In contrast, when adopting¹⁸ a *Stapelia grandiflora*, I was indifferent to its strange appearance. It came with a label and I was able to provide the care it required. It is a slow growing plant and I therefore did not take much notice of it. My interest was sparked only when pink, fleshy trumpet-like buds started pushing up from the bottom of one of the stems. When the flower opened, in spite of its unpleasant smell, it had intriguing patterns on the inside, and I found the hairy texture fascinating. It had a completely different aesthetic appeal based on its architectural form rather than the delicate appearance I would have been drawn to in the past. As soon as I became interested in the plant based on its flowers, I also noticed interesting characteristics on the rest of the plant. The new growth had a velvety texture and purple edges, while older parts had black spots that eventually developed a brown scab-like texture. The flower did not last long, and closed and shrivelled up quickly. When this happened, the thick wrinkled flesh-coloured flower in combination with the hairs on the inside of the flower, reminded me of aged human skin. In this context, the scabs also started appearing human, and I felt I could relate to the plant (Figure 17). I appreciated it not only for its 'human' qualities, but also started noticing what makes this plant unique.

¹⁸ Adopted plants were given to me or bought from the nursery. Someone else cared for these before me.

Stapelia grandiflora was the point of departure for the work *Shedding Skin* (2018) (Figure 18). The *Stapelia grandiflora* has very few care requirements, needing only a small amount of water. I therefore included a small water dripper, trying to camouflage it by mimicking the shape and texture of its stems. I documented its growth and flowering in its journal, which provides a more intimate understanding of this plant. Despite my initial experience of it as other or alien based on its appearance, it revealed several almost human characteristics already mentioned that helped me to form a connection with it. It is noteworthy that my initial connection to the plants was based on their physical appearance. This connection deepened through experience and knowledge gained. Thereafter I developed an interest in how they relate to other plants and their ecological impact.



Figure 18: Marili de Weerd and *Stapelia grandiflora*, *Shedding Skin*, 2018. Plywood, wood, glue, nails, paper, thread, watercolour, ink, plastic, wire, 136 x 22 x 27 cm. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

As a result of my experience with the plants, and realising their responsive character, my approach shifted to become more attuned, and I recognised their agency and ‘subjectivity’ (rather than treating them as an object or a medium) in the garden. Focussing on plants and their role in the garden as actors in an ecological network allows me to emphasise them as subjects with a will and needs that affect the gardener, and results in certain behaviours in the gardener (Salwa 2014:316). For Donovan (2016:10), the recognition of non-human nature as subject results in a caring rather than exploitative relationship where humans are attentive and respectful towards non-human life forms. I wanted to emphasise what Power (2005:39) refers to as the “embodied engagement” between active human and non-human actors by visualising the relationship between humans and plants in a way that emphasises

the agency of plants. This process of collaboration is not without negotiation, challenge and competition; it is a dynamic process (Power 2005:39). In this description, plants collaborate with humans to create the garden, achieved by enrolling the care and interest of gardeners (Power 2005:46). The plants become subjects with equal power, as Donovan (2016:11) maintains, which unsettles the culture/nature binary (Power 2005:48). As an attuned being, it would be ignorant to assume that power relationships in the garden have been dissolved. Human beings, including myself, continue to make decisions on behalf of plants, and sometimes even with the best intentions they are not necessarily based on the best interests of the plant. The gardeners' care towards plants and the desire for them to thrive, is still based on the selfish need to reflect their efforts and not the well-being of the plant. An example is using excessive amounts of fertiliser to encourage an abundance of blooms, which may indicate to the human eye that the plant is thriving, when in fact it may be strained under the weight of the flowers. This is not in the interest of the plant.

Caring for the plants is central to the artwork, and during the process of tending to them, my ideas about them changed. I had to identify a way to include my changed views in the installation to communicate the way each actor was altered in the relationship. The relational understanding of the complex interactions between the environment and its various human and non-human 'actors' challenges the reductionist approach of Cartesian dualisms (Hitchings 2003:100). The act of caring was visualised using documentation in the form of notes and journals. Here the actions and reactions of selected plants were recorded from a cultivating artist's perspective. In that, caring is visualised as both enhancing and detrimental to the health of the plant. The frailty of the relationship was further visualised with unstable stands that hold everything together. The complexity of the care system held together relates to the level of the plant's needs. At times I deliberately interfered excessively to see how the plant would respond. *Tapestry* and *Entangled* are two examples of my deliberate interference (Figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19: Marili de Weerd and *Mondia whitei* (Apocynaceae), *Tapestry*, 2018.
Wood, glue, nails, thread, 180 x 35 x 35 cm.
Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.



Figure 20: Marili de Weerd and *Petopentia natalensis*, *Entangled*, 2018.
Wood, glue, nails, thread, paper, watercolour, ink, 180 x 35 x 35 cm.
Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

Both *Tapestry* (Figure 19) and *Entangled* (Figure 20) incorporate climbers, which are dependent on physical support to grow high in order to get enough light. The climber's success is reliant on finding something suitable to grow against, which created the opportunity for me to collaborate with the plant in a different way. By providing the physical support the plant requires, I could direct growth without too much 'resistance'. The two plants had different characteristics and behaviours. The *Mondia whitei* integrated in *Tapestry* grew upright with supple, single stems, while the *Petopentia natalensis* or Propeller vine integrated in *Entangled* had several woody stems that grew in different directions. The

characteristics of the *Mondia whitei* lent itself to creating a flat tapestry-like panel. I wanted to take a weaving approach to see how the plant and I could turn a conversation into a physical object. I built a frame for us to work in, and as the plant grew, I tied it to the frame with string pulling it in different directions to start weaving. Its response was always an upward growing stem. When the stem became long enough, it started circling around to find support. Pulling the plant in different directions seemed to slow down its growth. It was always interesting to wait and see how the plant would respond to what I was doing to it – forming a sort of dialogue. As the web grew denser, new growth wove itself through the threads on its way up, and I eventually stopped interfering. In keeping with its character, it grew flat and upright. My interference was not appreciated, and as soon as I stopped the plant flourished. Extensive interference and control stifled the plant's growth. The Propeller vine's branches were not as pliable as the *Mondia whitei*, and I could not work with it as a flat weave. I used plant tags to record interesting colours or changes as they occurred on the plant. The narrative therefore started at the bottom, going up as the plant grew. This plant was not as bothered by me twisting its branches in different directions, but it did abandon growth on one of the stems when another overtook it. It took on more of a column shape, and I was able to compact it a bit more with my web-like weaving, mimicking the 'architecture' of spiders. With this analogy, I wanted to explore a similar kind of construction *with* nature to counter the perception of human presence as contaminating.

In this study, human intervention in natural processes was experienced as positive in some instances, while it had a negative impact in other instances. In the case of climbers, providing support structures for the plant is helpful, but can at times overwhelm the appearance of the plant in contrast with what one would find in the garden, where these systems are usually hidden. At times a symbiotic relationship between people and plants and amongst plants is achieved. However, people-plant and plant-plant relationships are often complicated with competition, flux and instability. *Rivalry* (2018) (Figure 21) is an example of internal competition. Two of the same species, *Macledium zeyheri* or Doll's protea, were in my care, but only one was visible, and I could see its reactions clearly. The other was slightly hidden amongst other plants as some of these surrounding plants grew faster. Not being clearly visible meant that it had to compete with other plants for my attention. As a result, I was not as attentive to it and it died. I wanted to display this dead plant in contrast with conventional garden practices where dead plants are removed from sight very quickly. This related to the idea that plants are expected to perform all year round. I threaded it back together carefully and suspended it in a frame to show all its parts, roots included, to see the plant as a whole. It comes across as frail, naked and exposed instead of dressed in soil.



Figure 21: Marili de Weerd and *Macedium zeyheri* (Sond.) S. Ortiz, *Rivalry*, 2018. Plywood, wood, glue, nails, thread, plastic, wire, 134 x 33 x 17 cm. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.

Initial conceptualisations of *The Paradoxical Garden* required the performance of plants, considering their visual qualities rather than their basic needs for soil, constant irrigation and light. In learning about their needs through care, I realised that the initial plans for *The Paradoxical Garden* were not viable considering my basic knowledge and understanding of the possibilities of what plants can do and what I could do without killing them. Consequently, the creative production was reconceptualised, based on the knowledge and understanding of plants that I subsequently gained. This meant that my initial imagined garden was adapted to include the needs of plants, and it became an enriching experience for me. The creative process as a result became situated in the possibilities of what can be achieved with specific indigenous plants. This consideration and acknowledgement that my visualisations ought to incorporate the intent of plants was the biggest turning point in the creative process. It resulted in a deepened sense of connection between myself and plants. With the decision to incorporate living plants in my installation, I was removed as the central figure orchestrating the installation. Other actors, mainly the plants, participated and affected the creative process. In stark contrast to the conventional way of making art, there were more limitations than creative possibilities. At this point, I already realised that I should not treat the plants as a medium, but I kept returning to a controlling mind-set as a default behaviour. The plants would not be treated as a medium, and showed their displeasure by

throwing off leaves or stunted growth. The most important aspect in the relationship with plants was attentiveness, resulting in a dialogical approach to creating. At the onset of this study I was going to produce an artwork, visualising my ideas for others to appreciate and experience. What happened instead was an intricate, invisible process with little remnants, small visual glimpses, and curiously static outcomes.

What was exhibited eventually describes the transformative experience I have undergone. From the initial planning of a big exhibition to the resultant smaller, more focussed and contained works demonstrates how my ideas shifted. My ideas were realised with a few living plants, a few marks on paper, and some scraps of plastic moulded around plants. In contrast with the spectacle art sometimes displays, this exhibition utilises minimal resources to visualise a process. As in the garden, where the labour is not visible, one has to search for traces of the process that shaped *The Paradoxical Garden*. To experience *The Paradoxical Garden* as a hybrid achievement, the viewer needs to engage with it deeply and scrutinise the plants and the care processes that supported them in order to identify the evidence. *The Paradoxical Garden* was formed through rigorous dialogue with various plants and objects, and in its final presentation reflects a variety of voices, including mine. The installation is displayed as a collaborative achievement that demonstrates the agency of plants.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF AESTHETIC IMMERSION

This chapter investigates the process of making two series of work as part of *The Paradoxical Garden* (2018), as well as the immersive experience related to this. The first section of this chapter explores how plants were involved in creating a series of artworks in a more conventional format using ink on paper. *Co-create* is a collaborative series of drawings that explores the agency of plants. Thereafter I explain my interference and co-operation with existing cultivating processes used by humans to tend to plants in the garden in *Commingle*. *Commingle* is a sculptural installation in a greenhouse that wishes to visualise the integration of natural processes with human interventions. Embodied experience, relational understanding and aesthetic immersion are dealt with in these two series of work. Each artwork acts to destabilise dualistic views, and is explored to identify its transformative potential. In keeping with the view of the garden as a hybrid achievement, various actors who contribute to *The Paradoxical Garden* are acknowledged.

During my interactions with the various plants, their unique characters became more evident. To extend this notion, I proceeded to experiment with the idea of co-creating with plants by using ink and bodily movement through vegetation to create drawings. This work was conceptualised in response to the idea that a person's uniqueness and presence can be expressed by a signature or by leaving a mark. Using different techniques in *Co-create*, the unique marks of various plants were captured on paper as a collective drawing. According to Margaret Davidson (2011:115), mark making is a collaborative action wherein the surface, tools, medium and material play part, but it is "governed by the intentionality of the artist". As I moved through the plants, they made their presence felt as human body and plant bodies collided. I used ink as a means to visualise our material expression as plants touched, scraped or hit against the paper attached to my body. The evidence of this collaborative performance was marks all over the page with no focal point. This supports the idea that the artist is often not in full control of a collaborative process. Just as the artist is decentred, the focal point shifts all over the page.

In the final theme of this chapter, dealing with *Commingle* (2018), a relational approach shaped a system of living beings where nurture and competition were made explicit. I will explain how this approach topples the human actor as the pinnacle of power in the construction of identity, and rather emphasise the idea that it is not only the human, but

everything in the immediate surroundings that contributes to human understanding. Power and control cannot be ascribed to a single entity within a network, as there are many living and inert influences that help shape human ideas. From the perspective of ANT, according to Power (2005:42), the presence of non-humans and moments of interaction between diverse human and non-human actors are acknowledged in the garden; one concedes that humans are not at the centre of all happenings, but rather one of many participants. The discussion on *Commingle* clarifies the creative process and resulting artworks as relational activities.

4.1. Collaboration between plants and humans

The idea of collaboration as a means to destabilise anthropocentrism is enacted in the body of work titled *Co-create*. These works were created at the Faerie Glen Nature Reserve (FGNR) (Pretoria), where plants are largely left to their own devices in contrast with human interference commonly found in the domestic garden. Although the location is not categorised as a garden as dictated by this study, the site was of interest to me because these plants are not sustained by excessive human involvement. They are resilient, independent beings who arrange themselves within a space. Their independent behaviour complemented the idea of agency I wanted to portray.¹⁹ To amplify the agential powers of plants, I collaborated with them to create ink drawings. The process of co-creating is just as relevant to this study as the outcome where the drawings themselves serve as evidence of control that has, to a degree, been relinquished.

As I, the artist-researcher, increasingly connected with all the participants in the garden during the act of caring, collaboration became an important focus. Influenced by ANT of Latour (1996) and Law (2007), I included plants and all other matter found in the garden as actors that contribute to both the appearance and behaviour of the garden. ANT (see Chapter 2.2.1) relies on relationships between an arrangement of objects and things to decentre human presence. Each actor is viewed as an agent who can bring change and contribute to the construction of knowledge and identity, which are viewed as relational achievements (Power 2005:42). In ANT, knowledge and identity are viewed as social, as opposed to individual human constructions. As previously stated, this approach topples the human actor as the pinnacle of power in the construction of identity, and rather emphasises

¹⁹ This is not to say that the plants in the garden have less agency, but the distribution of vegetation is less controlled. This reduced human interference, I believe, would contribute more easily to the aims of the artwork to emphasise a shift in human controlling behaviour towards natural processes based on less interference.

the idea that it is not only the human, but everything in the immediate surroundings that contributes to understanding. Power and control cannot be ascribed to a single entity within a network as there are many living and inert influences that help shape human ideas. According to Power (2005:42), from the perspective of ANT, the presence of non-humans and moments of interaction between diverse human and non-human actors are acknowledged in the garden; one recognises that humans are not at the centre of all endeavours, but rather one of many participants.

Introducing living organisms to *The Paradoxical Garden* compelled a departure from my initial imaginings of what the sculptural installation would look like. I intended to replicate the way Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger's *Falling Garden* (2003) (Figure 5 on page 31) created visual impact by presenting the cultural aspects of being human together with natural components in a way that transforms our thinking about how humans should relate to non-human nature. However, *Falling Garden* (2003) was made mostly with 'dead' organic matter in contrast to the living organisms included in *The Paradoxical Garden*. For the living organisms to remain alive, the visualisation of the sculptural installation had to be adapted. In order to enhance an understanding of the garden as a hybrid achievement, and show plants in the garden as living things with which humans are connected, *The Paradoxical Garden* had to take a form that would sustain the life of the plants. Sustaining the plants becomes a hidden cultural act instead of a suspended object, as in *Falling Garden*.

Co-creating and commingling with plants in the garden captures the unique agential character of various plants, as well as how they relate to each other in the garden. Although this does not dissipate the anthropocentric view owing to the anthropocentric nature of art and it being firmly situated in a human perspective (Grey 1993:464), the human actor in the garden is more aware and considerate of non-human actors in the network. Situating human presence within the garden as one of the actors contributing to the garden, instead of as the controlling force, shifts the perception towards the garden as a hybrid achievement. The interaction between human nature and non-human nature in the ecology of the garden is visualised as both caring and harmful. Human presence is considered as one of many, and cannot be isolated as contaminating towards non-human nature. Co-creating in the garden can be viewed as an exchange between humans and plants. For Bennett (2004:353), "humans are never outside of a set of relations with other modes: we may learn to alter the quality of our encounters but not our encountering nature". Human presence itself is not understood as contaminating, but by being present, as with all other things in the ecology, humans affect what they come into contact with (Aretoulakis 2014:173). It is excessive force and ill-considered actions that contaminate, rather than 'presence' as such.

The process of making the first artwork in the *Co-create* series, *Encounters I*, evolved from the idea of the garden as a collaborative act (Figure 22). To concentrate on its collaborative nature, I imagined plants participating in the process of making more conventional artworks such as sketches or paintings. The process revealed itself when I was walking through plants, feeling them brush against my legs. These movements created a felt awareness of the presence of the plants; I realised that this was the perfect opportunity to collaborate, but that this collaboration would require a few additional actors. I strapped paper to my legs at specific points where bodily contact with the plants occurred and misted the plants with ink, so that they would leave a visible mark on the point of contact as I moved through them. The process was not initially successful, and I had to adapt the way I walked and the way I sprayed the ink onto the plants to be able to capture the point of connection visually. I wanted the result to be based on chance encounters between the ink, plant, paper and human, where my human presence is but one agent in the process of making. To add another element of chance, I used a spray bottle, so I had less control over how the ink was dispersed.

The encounters were initially captured on small pieces of paper that gradually increased in size. The planning focussed on the process, deciding which type and size of paper to use, what kind of ink, and the location and route I would walk. The plant growth represented indigenous vegetation with very few invasive species, as they are removed by environmentalist volunteers in the FGNR. The locations were determined by selecting areas in the reserve where plants grew closely together, but with enough space in between for me to walk through. The specific route I chose to walk had, however, to include enough plants at the height that would make contact with the paper strapped around my legs to leave marks. The visual outcome was mostly unplanned and could be described as several components coming together that either worked in favour of, or against, a successful result. Success was measured against how formal and visual properties of the drawing aligned with the conceptual aims. The resulting drawings were fairly low contrast, giving a delicate impression, which was countered with indents and scrapes visible on the paper (Figure 23). The overall appearance of the composition was achieved where there is no focal point, which aligns with the idea that several actors contributed to the process of making, but that different ones are dominant at different times. The drawing reflects the rhythmic movement of walking through the plants and making contact with the leaves and branches. This relational aspect of the final drawing means that a lack of control in the process of making results in a lack of control in the visual outcome. I had to relinquish the idea of representing my own identity and ideas on paper, and needed to acknowledge the equal contribution of

others. By means of this, authorship shifts from representing a single, authoritative voice to include a combination of several, often dissonant voices.



Figure 22: Marili de Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.775605, 28.296253, *Encounters I*, 2018. Fabriano paper, India ink, wood, plastic, dimensions variable. Postgraduate House, UP. Photograph by the author.



Figure 23: Marili De Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.775605, 28.296253, detail from *Encounters I*, 2018. India ink on Fabriano paper. Photograph by the author.

Using more familiar art making materials in *Encounters* meant that I could provide a context, and I was able to make comparisons with work previously completed. Paper was used for its tactile and responsive quality as it is sensitive to pressure. Each encounter left a permanent

indent on the surface of the paper, which became a site of contact. Apart from the scratches and dents as evidence of contact, the addition of India ink made the contact more visible. India ink was used because it is nontoxic as the main component is soot, and thus would have the least effect on the plants. In addition, its dense black colour would capture the plant's contact with the paper clearly and provide visual impact. Using two spray bottles, one with a diluted solution and another with an undiluted solution, provided varied tones in random areas. I had to complete several iterations in order for a clearly visible texture of layered marks to form on the page. The resulting work is delicate, textured and largely uncontrolled, and it contrasts visually with previous work I have created using similar materials.

The influence of my collaborators is clearly visible in *Encounters*. In a discussion on Thing-power materialism, Jane Bennett (2004:348) explains how objects or “things” can influence human thinking and behaviour, and that being sensitive to these powers might enhance an awareness of ecological relationships. Although I do not view plant as objects, as living things they have managed to re-arrange my thoughts and perceptions, making their presence and intent known spatially. This connection with plants as non-human phenomena reveals how they are active subjects. The active presence of plants and other actors in the network of collaborative drawing is foregrounded at the expense of the artist-researcher's signature, but the human presence is not minimised. Although much of the movement is controlled by the artist, the plants, water and ink, and the behaviour of these actors, are major contributors to the final artwork (Figure 24). This act can be described as research in what Sullivan (2006:22) calls a transformative act that impacts on both the researcher and the researched. My understanding of plants in this work shifted from static beings to beings that can express themselves materially because their physical presence leaves traces on a page. Kemenyffy (2008:104) describes the process of including contributions by non-human nature in one's drawing process “a humbling experience” because the artist should consider and be respectful to the forces at work. According to Davidson (2011:95), when creating non-human nature induced marks “[...] the artist has to relinquish control somewhere in the process. This letting go is part of the difficulty of drawing this way, but also contributes to the work's authenticity and depth.” Davidson (2011:115) furthermore states that “mark making and the decisions that artists have to make about mark making do not occur in a vacuum.” The series of marks on paper are a representation of the presence of every plant that brushed against its surface. The plant therefore contributed to the artwork and cannot be viewed as a passive object. The artwork was created in a collaborative context with multiple contributors.



Figure 24: Marili De Weerd, exhibition views of *Co-create*, 2018. Photographs by the author.

The collaborative process was messy and, in some ways, even uncontrolled. The main aim was to mark the contact between the plants and the paper strapped to my body; as I accidentally stepped on several plants, they scraped, hit and pricked me in return. As I cut through the vegetation and trod on plants, I left a trail of destructive evidence behind me. This can be described as invasive of the plants' space because human presence and contact have direct and somewhat negative impact. For Kemenyffy (2008:104), even when an act of drawing in the landscape can be described as intrusive, the artist is affected in acknowledgement of other authors in addition to oneself. The plants, however, recover quickly. There is a continual resistance or tension between the artist, the plants and the material; this is what van Boeckel (2015:120) refers to as the artwork "talking back". It is not a harmonious experience, and I was not overwhelmed with a feeling of connection and awe during the process.

I exhibited the collaborative drawing with inked plants to represent the vegetation that contributed to the work, and to demonstrate the effect of ink on the plants. The blackened plants visually extended the drawing's presence into the third dimension. They form a black cloud in front of the sketch that enables viewer to note correlations between the marks on the page and the plant that made them. As the plants continued to grow, they incorporated a durational element that was revealed as the fresh green leaves contrasted with the darkened plant. These plants were displayed with the works in order to visualise the relationship between the product and the process. Their presence was offered in support of the

collaborative ethos of the work, and to enhance the material and durational aspects of the drawing. Ink, spray bottles, elastics and clips were also exhibited as associates in the work. Video documentation of the event was shown to give viewers access to the event. The viewer is simultaneously confronted with both the process and the outcome, and tries to connect the evidence provided. Although I did not apply the same level of care to the plants in the FGNR as I did to the ones I keep, a sense of awareness and consideration of my kinship with plants in my care meant that I did not want to cause unnecessary damage. These plants are protected in the Reserve; they may not be removed. The same species were put on display in the gallery. I wanted to work together with plants in their space, as they grow, without uprooting them or causing more damage than necessary. This is further evidence of my aim to find ways to interact with plants that also consider the interests and well-being of plants.



Figure 25: Marili De Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.775605, 28.296253, left, detail from *Encounters I*, 2018. India ink on Fabriano paper. Photograph by the author.

Figure 26: Marili De Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.776026, 28.296313, right, detail from *Encounters II*, 2018. India ink on Fabriano paper. Photograph by the author.

As part of the *Co-create* series, *Encounters II* explored slightly less invasive methods of collaborating with the plants (Figure 27). I built a device that would roll over the plants more gently and did not require my direct presence. The device consisted of two plastic hoops to which the paper was attached in order to form a drum-like shape that could be rolled over the plants to capture their marks. In making *Encounters II*, I rolled the paper more gently on top of the plants in order to soak up the ink instead of walking straight through them, thereby

incorporating areas already flattened by human and animal presence while being used as walkways. A change in orientation from working upright with shrub-type plants to working flat with grasses influenced the appearance of the resulting sketches as the types of marks left showed less dripping and finer details were imprinted. The shape of the marks also reflects how the impression of the grass is different to the scrape or brush of the shrubs, revealing the different material forms. Following Donovan's (2016:10) aesthetics of care, my interactions with the grasses aimed to be responsive and attentive to the environment, and although violence was avoided, it cannot be excluded completely. Even in a state of care, intentions clash and conflict may be present. A collaborative endeavour challenged the negotiation between myself and the plants, and making contact between the inked plants and the paper was present the whole time. During the collaborative act of drawing myself and the plants, we were involved in a cultural production that challenges the idea of human exceptionalism, firmly transgressing the culture/nature divide.

In *Encounters III*, I aimed to create a more visible distinction between the marks different plants tend to make as a sort of handwriting or fingerprint that visualises their uniqueness. These works involved single, static plants, which allowed me to work with watery ink²⁰ and layer the plant impressions. I did not want to force the plants onto the paper in a way that would cause damage, so only the tips of the leaves and other protruding parts touched the paper in order to leave imprints. The diluted ink gave way in the presence of a leaf or branch, which left that area blank, leaving soft edges around what appears as an almost ghostlike presence of the plant that exaggerates its absence. As a result, the ink seemingly played a bigger role in creating the artwork. The ink dried over a longer period of time and was able to show the plant's character more clearly in conjunction with the stems and leaves by leaving lines and patterns around it as it dried. The relationship between the plant, the ink and the paper created the artwork. My role was to bring them together, and in doing so, I played the role of a facilitator rather than an author.

²⁰ Working on smaller pages meant that the paper could be stretched, and the pages would not be warped by the presence of a lot of wet media.



Figure 27: Marili de Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.776026, 28.296313, *Encounters II*, 2018. Fabriano paper, India ink, wood, plastic, dimensions variable. Postgraduate House, UP. Photographs by the author.



Figure 28: Marili de Weerd and various indigenous plants located at -25.776268, 28.296426, *Encounters III*, 2018. Fabriano paper, India ink, wood, plastic, Dimensions variable. Postgraduate House, UP. Photographs by the author.

4.1.1. Collaboration with specialists

Discussions with landscape architects and botanists also resulted in drastic changes in the visualisation of my ideas. Each conversation contributed to the development of my ideas. Even though the main aim of these conversations was to determine the logistic viability and possibilities of working with plants, creative contributions were also made to the development of the installation. As many as my views were influenced by each conversation, the discussion resonated and possibly enhanced my perception of plants as collaborators, rather than a mere medium for creative manipulation. The conversations were dominated by discussions about growth, seasons, timing and growing conditions, which drew my attention to the processes of gardening. This resonates with Grant Kester's (2005:1) view that a process-based artwork that includes conversations aims to provide context rather than content. As these works are usually not object-driven, dialogues interact with existing ideas and how they relate to prevailing ideologies (Kester 2005:1).

Many shifts in my thinking materialised in conversation, either with plants or humans. The most notable change occurred after a conversation with Johan Wentzel, a geologist whose hobby of cultivation turned into a business. He gave me several indigenous plants to work with. Much of Wentzel's work is centred on grasslands, and his fascination with grasses rubbed off on me and is evident in *Encounters III* (Figure 28). Interestingly, in line with many ecological thinkers such as Morton (2007), his gardening strategy aligns with the concept of minimal interference – allowing plants and all the other elements of the garden to interact. To get to this point in a garden, however, one has to 'interfere', most of which involves propagation and establishing plants. Because the majority of plants Wentzel works with are deciduous,²¹ he introduced me to a different idea of plant performance where deciduous species are not hidden when they rest, but remain part of the garden; this results in a changed aesthetic that appreciates withering and flourishing.

Conversations with Neal Dunstan, a landscape architect with similar visions of minimal interference with plant growth in the garden, further disrupted my ideas about plants. He advised me not to be precious about plants, but to allow people to step on them and even crush them. Initially baffled by this comment, I later realised that this is part of the human experience of plants. In spite of continually being stepped on, the plants remain rather resilient, and even use the interaction with animals as part of their survival strategy by attaching seeds to the passers-by. There is thus no need to be overprotective or overly cautious when interacting with plants, as they are determined to survive.

4.1.2. Process, material properties and emergent properties

During the making of *The Paradoxical Garden*, an interesting tension between plants as artistic medium and plants as subjects developed. Although I regard plants as subjects and co-creators, one of my main occupations during the initial process of this study was trying to get them to do what I want. In some ways my treatment of plants related to how I would treat any other medium, such as pencils and paint, which may involve cruel decisions when one considers plants as living matter. However, because they are alive they resist, requiring much more effort on my behalf to complete an artwork. My effort resulted in a deepening connection. Gradually getting to know each plant and its needs more intensely made me more conscious of how the plant may experience the same conditions that I do. For

²¹ Deciduous plants die back in the winter and are usually removed or hidden with other plants in their resting state in gardens (World of flowering plants 2017:[sp]). However, there is a current move to leave the yellow gold and brown resting plants in plain view instead of trying to cover them up with green plants.

example, weather conditions directly influenced my care of the plants owing to their primary need for water. Very hot conditions alerted me to the fact that more frequent watering is required, while when it rained I felt relief for the plants. I became aware of the amount, quality, pH, nutrition, drainage and texture of the soil. In order to be able to create with the plants, I had to become orientated to their needs. My artworks were brought to life in a conversation between the artist, the plants and inert materials. This 'conversation' relates to Tim Ingold's (2012:433) statement that as much as the artist 'gives form' to raw material, the material takes form.

As unknown properties are explored and unfamiliar territory is entered, the artist frequently has to improvise in unfamiliar situations. According to van Boeckel (2015:112), improvisation is the accommodation of the new and the unanticipated. It is a reaction based on intuition and tacit knowledge. Living matter often reacts in unexpected ways to creative actions, either resisting or accepting them; the artist is dependent on intuition and is obliged to improvise to create something new and meaningful. In *The Paradoxical Garden*, meaning is generated by being part of an ecological system. Everything in the installation is part of this system and provides meaning to everything else in the system; everything is interconnected, and different components interact with each other. For instance, the fluctuating appearance of the collaborative drawings only reveal the uniqueness of their marks in relation to one another. The actions of collaboration in *Co-create* and the actions of interference in *Commingle*, when viewed in relation to each other, strengthen the idea that interaction between human and non-human nature is both nurturing and harmful.

4.2. An ecological assemblage

Commingle is a sculptural installation in a functioning greenhouse on the University of Pretoria campus. This greenhouse, also referred to as the Karoo Greenhouse, contains several succulent species that grow in winter rainfall areas. This greenhouse is particularly hot and dry to suit the plants' preferred growing conditions. I added to the collection by bringing in plants from the same genus as those that already populated the greenhouse, such as Mesembryanthemums (better known as *vygies*) and Pelargoniums. The plants were suspended from the greenhouse roof at eye level and higher to assert their spatial materiality. A very simple irrigation system was also suspended from the ceiling to water the plants that needed a bit more moisture than the very hardy succulents in the greenhouse. Using thread and clay, I extended my installation to involve existing plants and processes or to juxtapose the artificial aspect of human interference with organic processes.

In the process of making *Commingle* (Figures 30 to 34), I exercised restraint by working with what was already present in the greenhouse to amplify areas of interest. I identified plant behaviour that displayed their intent clearly, and tried to draw attention to these instances, such as plants growing into the greenhouse from outside. I also emphasised how existing natural and artificial processes are interdependent and mostly beneficial to the plants in this space. Utilising this blurred boundary, artificial components such as the plant containers mimic organic forms by bulging and changing shape to accommodate and protect their contents. The containers open up in unexpected places to allow plant growth to exit. The containers align their purpose with and support plant growth, and are portrayed as co-dependant with natural processes. Materials normally used in the garden, such as drip irrigation regulators, are merged with other items, distorted and disguised to echo the appearance of plants. Together these form an immersive experience within which the notion of plants as fragile and passive recipients of human intent is questioned – allowing for a shift between an anthropocentric and an eco-centric perspective. Through exposed and playful human interference, the interaction between human and non-human nature is made visible rather than hidden. Plants are not shown as pristine, and human presence is not presented as threatening. Instead, the relation between the reimagined garden and the cultivating artist is presented as interconnected.



Figure 29: Marili de Weerd and various indigenous plants. *Commingle* detail, 2018. Thread, plastic, wire, soil, water. Dimensions variable. Karoo Greenhouse, Botanical garden area, E.3.2. UP. Photographs by the author.

4.2.1. Nurture, interference and contamination

The complexity of the connection between plants and people is clearly visible in the enclosed, protected environment of the greenhouse. This space provided the perfect place to investigate and experiment with the relationship between plants and people. It was obvious that the newly-introduced plants thrived in this environment as the temperature and light quality were ideal. Although the ambient environment was favourable for the plants, the greenhouse was hot and dry and the plants required more watering than I could provide. Some form of irrigation was necessary; with previous tests I established that using drip irrigation with dripper tips or thread works best to extend the times between watering. The visibility of this system allowed bits of the artificial irrigation to be entangled with the natural to resemble the other. Irrigation tubes were twisted and turned around the existing structures in the same manner that a vine would climb around it. Plastic containers that form part of the irrigation system were compressed, melted and shaped to blend visually with plants. The importance of two irreplaceable aspects of the garden, namely water and soil, was also emphasised as actors within the network of *Commingle*. Plants were also uprooted and their growth displayed using transparent containers. The soil was exposed to show its hidden underside where most of the plant's 'thinking' takes place in order to consider the value of invisible aspects such as roots and soil and their properties more consciously. Viewing the plants from below or unusual angles with their roots exposed may reveal characteristics not normally considered, and rendered the plant stranger than before.



Figure 30: Marili De Weerd, detail of *Commingle* featuring irrigation as nurturing, 2018. Plastic, soil, elastic, cable ties, glue, fertiliser, various plants. Photograph by the author.



Figure 31: Marili De Weerd, detail of *Commingle* featuring the theme of transparency, 2018. Plastic, soil, elastic, cable ties, glue, fertiliser, various plants. Photographs by the author.

Material used in gardens, such as mesh used to keep pets out, was repurposed by melting it and shaping it to form containers. The mesh material was designed to keep things out, but now also to keep things in – applying heat to the containers made them shrink and distort; this changed their appearance and made them look more organic and blend in with the space. Non-toxic clay was used to form imagined infestations that in some instances contrasted significantly with the surrounding environment in which they were placed, and in other instances blended in to form part of the environment. For example, adding red balls clustered together could at first glance be interpreted as berries, which is in stark contrast to the cactus they were attached to. The colour red is associated with warning; in the case of plants, red is also associated with threatened species on the red data list. Here the use of red draws attention to the threatening aspect of the thorns, creating an interplay between threat and vulnerability.

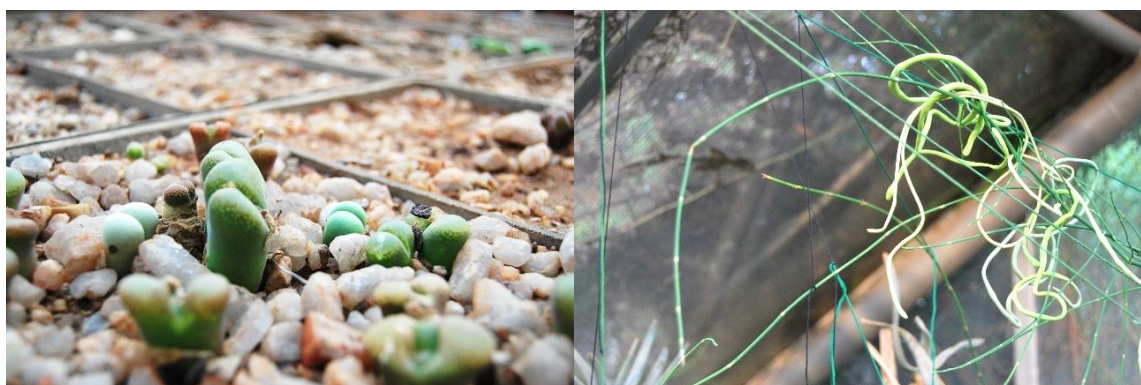


Figure 32: Marili De Weerd, detail of *Commingle* featuring interference, 2018. Plastic, soil, elastic, cable ties, glue, fertiliser, various plants. Photographs by the author.

Apart from the obvious juxtapositions of bright artificial components on the plants, other interventions were camouflaged to suggest the integration of artifice with growth processes. An example of this integration is in changing the shape of *Conophytum* (Figure 32 left) or inconspicuously adding artificial cones next to the living ones in a way that mimicked the living plants. The living plant paid no attention to this alien presence. I imagine if I had to do the same experiment with the *Pellaea calomelanos* used in *Waterworks* (2018), it would surely react adversely owing to its sensitivity. Many of these clay interventions consist of irregular, clustered spheres that imitate bacteria, to emphasise a contaminating human presence. However, human interference was not the only kind, as some unwelcome plants made their way into the greenhouse by growing through the mesh wall to reach the favourable conditions inside. I made these plants more visible by pulling them further into the space using green string and making them appear denser by adding clay tendrils that imitate the shape of the plants trying to enter. By transforming the original properties of materials and rendering them obscure, one is creating a state of 'in-between' where the distinction between seeming opposites is disrupted.

One might consider plants as being changeable in relation to seasons, while artificial components would supposedly be more stable. Instead, the artificial components faded in the sun, proving the plants to be more resilient. This resilience was further enhanced by juxtaposing fragile artificial bubbles with rugged plants, inverting the perception of plants as fragile and ephemeral and the human-made as more permanent. These bubbles burst and melted, resulting in traces of plastic film. The plastic residue could be seen as smothering and toxic, yet added ethereal beauty to the installation. When illuminated from behind, the plastic brightened in colour, leaving the green of nature pale in comparison. Over a period of time, the introduced plants adapted to the greenhouse along with its restrictions; for example, the *Albuca bracteata* (Thunb) or Pregnant onion flower stems followed the shape of the roof. The *vygies* adapted to their new containers by pushing new stems out of the holes in the melted plastic. Plants that were suspended at an angle adapted the direction of their growth to an upright position. The plants adjusted themselves according to the environment.



Figure 33: Marili De Weerd, details of *Commingle* featuring *Pack of Pelargoniums*, 2018. Plastic, soil, elastic, cable ties, glue, fertiliser, various plants. Photographs by the author.

Although the majority of the plants were seemingly not affected or rather showed no reaction to the other plants that shared their spaces, one plant displayed social behaviour. A section of the work named *Pack of Pelargoniums* (Figure 33) took shape when I realised the very social nature of these plants. Pelargoniums wane when isolated, but flourish and recover very quickly when placed in the company of their own species. Placing a Pelargonium with other plants from the same region had no effect on its growth, but when placed with its own kind, growth rates increased. The ‘pack’ behaviour is best observed when they share the same soil as well, rather than just sharing space. Although each plant stayed true to the nature of its species, they responded to the environment in a way that would benefit their development.

4.2.2. Subject-object relationships: The slowing down of the viewer’s experience

With the sculptural installation *Commingle*, I also aimed to address the subject/object dualism. This was achieved by decentering the human subject in relation to the ‘objects’ exhibited, and setting up a dialogue between subject and object where it becomes nearly impossible to view a living being as an object when it starts talking back. Installation art provides two dominant modes of immersion, both of which are modes of perceiving. The first is the observation or studying of subject matter in the process of creating and translating that into an artwork, as discussed in Chapter Three. The second is being immersed within the installation itself.

In this section, I discuss immersion within an art installation as an act that emphasises relationality. When the artist and the engaged viewer become involved in the installation in a

state of awareness, a connection to the things in the installation may be established. Being immersed in an installation means the viewer is removed from a single detached viewpoint, as opposed to, for example, viewing a painting in one-point perspective. The viewer, conventionally the detached subject, becomes part of the arrangement in an installation (Bishop 2010:11). The subject becomes one thing amongst many, and becomes aware of its limited vision, heightening the awareness of the other senses. According to Hawkins (2010:327), being immersed means that one can only perceive parts of the whole artwork at a time, and perhaps become more vigilant. Although vision remains the dominant means of perceiving, the other senses are harnessed as well. The subjectivity of the viewer is not dissolved, but being more aware of the surroundings results in an understanding of being within or part of the installation, not the centre of it. As the viewer moves through the installation, new relationships are formed and arrangements interpreted or misinterpreted, and meanings are formed. Bishop (2010:12) calls this state of the viewing subject “decentred” because, in contrast with a painting, the single vantage point arranged around the viewer is replaced with an unlimited number of vantage points in the work. Within the cluttered space of *The Paradoxical Garden*, this means that the viewer is only able to experience small sections of the work at a time, which allows different aspects to be foregrounded at different times. It is possible that the relationship between plants evident in *Pack of Pelargoniums*, the relationship between natural and artifice, and the relationship between humans and plants, are addressed when viewers move between the plants in the space. Owing to the narrowness of the space, viewers are more aware of their bodies in order not to bump into other objects or people, which contributes to the decentred state that allows greater awareness of one’s surroundings.

4.2.3. Flux within the ecological assemblage

Instability, obscurity and flux are emphasised in the installation by using visualisation techniques to show changes that occurred during the creative process, not only with individual plants, but also between plants. This assemblage was in continual flux. Not only were there often newcomers, but there were also casualties as well as a continual stream of unwanted participants such as aphids, heat waves, *Anoplognathus pallidicollis* (more commonly known as Christmas beetles), winds that damaged the leaves, and weeds that emerged from the soil. The assemblage is not closed; nor is it stable. Sometimes when I saw a new plant germinating, I waited to see what it might be – a weed or a plant –and I only removed it when I was satisfied that I did not want it. All that I deemed weeds or invaders, were removed and discarded as meaningless trash. At times, because I was uninformed or misinterpreted the plant’s signals, I left several plant ‘corpses’ in my wake. Such interactions

with plants are not blameless. According to Morton (2011:165), these objects (he includes humans in this category) contain a degree of mistranslation, as some of the intent will get lost in the process of interpretation. I frequently added objects and new plants to my ecology that affected the others, albeit small changes. Competing for space and light, growing around or over or withering away, were some of their responses; how the plant reacts to its container was also interesting. Some were planted in plastic bags and showed no signs of dissatisfaction, but containers without holes caused some plants to rebel against their containers by wilting or rotting. Two plants may respond to the same object differently. A larger container for one plant means more space to grow, while it blocks the light for another plant that wishes to grow. When I made changes to the ecology of the garden, I anticipated the reaction, but often unexpected reactions occurred. These fluctuations required improvisation.

In my engagement with plants I sought to find a consciousness that I could relate to²². Instead, I found plants to be stranger, more complex and more enchanting than I had imagined. As a result, I am now more respectful of their mode of being as *other* to human beings. I aimed to engage with plants as subjects, only to realise that it is not plants that needed to be elevated to the level of being human, but rather humans that need to realise that they are on the same level as everything else. In Morton's (2011:165) view, humans, alongside everything else, need to be viewed as objects rather than subjects. The result is that it is not how humans view plants that needs to be adjusted, but rather how humans view themselves. For Wolfe (2010:62), this means challenging anthropocentrism and speciesism, which is complicated by the idea that no one thing can completely understand another. Things encounter each other where they translate or mistranslate each other. There is an ebb and flow within the ecological system; movement and continual change as new relationships form, and others disappear. It is an unforgiving process that leaves things in its wake.

Connectedness and various encounters in the ecology of a sculptural installation were emphasised in *The Paradoxical Garden*, which provided the opportunity for creative play with plants: collaboration and immersion challenged conventional understandings of the garden. Although the intention of my actions can be interpreted as 'gentle' and 'temporary', the resulting garden could have been experienced as something unfamiliar. An unfamiliar experience encourages a revised understanding of relationships in the garden, as well as

²² Throughout this study I acknowledge my initial anthropomorphic identification with plants, which developed into a deeper appreciation of the otherness of the plants I collaborated with.

the position of the human being as embedded within these relationships. Using contradiction and paradox echoes van de Vall's (2008:84) position on the role of art to change perspectives, describing it as laying "[...] the ground for emancipatory cultural transformations." *The Paradoxical Garden* introduced plants in a new light, and aimed to highlight aspects that are usually left unnoticed. Instead of introducing a different way of relating to plants in the garden, I attempted to show how gardeners are already altered by being enlisted into caring for plants. This points towards the paradox of the perception of human presence in the garden in opposition to the experience of gardening.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

During the process of making *The Paradoxical Garden*, several experiences impacted on my way of thinking about the relationship between people and plants. Although I had always seen my approach to art making as somewhat relational, as the artist I have always allowed my ideas and aesthetic preferences to dominate. In the body of work created for this study, my own stylistic and aesthetic preferences, and even my usual process of art making, made way for a collaborative approach, relational thinking, and a greater awareness and regard for the presence of others in my work. I came to several insights both *during* the cultivating creative process and in *retrospective review* or taking a “retroactive” approach, to borrow Mäkelä’s (2010:65) term in response to the aim I set at the beginning of this study. This aim was to use artistic practice, creative process and the engagement with garden matter to destabilise an anthropocentric understanding of the garden; to generate a cultivating artistic approach to unsettle the binary relationships between nature and culture in the garden.

On the inception of my practice, I understood the garden as a paradoxical space wherein binary relationships are negotiated. I undertook to explore this concept to emphasise the parts where binaries are altered to disrupt conventional anthropocentric perceptions of the garden. The act of ‘taming’ or ‘domesticating’ plants as part of my practice served to destabilise a binary perception of culture/nature by presenting a shift in power from human-centred to a reciprocal process. Thus, domestication is shown as a relational activity wherein the domesticated plant performs for its human counterpart, and the human in turn adopts behaviour that benefits the plant. In my *Care* series, works such as *Tamed* and *Remains* represent two opposing sides of domestication where one plant thrived under human care and the other died. In this study, a relationship of care developed between the plants and the artist-gardener, which encouraged changed behaviour in both participants. Power (2005:48) describes this reciprocity as ‘being for the other’, where the human actor behaves attentively and positively towards the plant organism. In such a way, the power relationship between nature and culture is unsettled. These familiar ideas are uprooted, re-imagined and destabilised, resulting in a revised understanding of the relationships between humans and non-human organisms and objects.

The cultivating aspect of art making in my creative process was emphasised, and included being attuned to and in communication with all the actors, including the materials. In the

artistic mode, even though the artistic process is fallible and can possibly be said to be human centred, I remained responsive to other actors. The artwork drew attention to my openness to communicate with plants and my attentiveness to their needs. My cultivating, creative process was used to construct an imagined posthuman garden. The garden can be described as posthuman rather than anthropocentric because it includes the interests of non-human others, in this case plants. An anthropocentric approach to the garden places human interest first, in which plants have to participate. By emphasising and engaging more deliberately in this participation, the garden revolves around the interests of people and plants, resulting in a negotiation that is based in care theory. The act of caring can be described as a response to things, being observant, tentative, and susceptible to a change in direction and intent based on the dialogue with another. But it is not without conflict and competition, as the intention of the actors varies. In the instance of the garden, a plant may desire to grow as high and wide as possible to reach as much light as possible, while the gardener may wish it to be shaped into a hedge, resulting in continuous pruning. The plant may challenge the pruning process with thorns that prick and cut, as well as woody branches that resist being cut off.

In *The Paradoxical Garden*, some of the exchanges were documented in journals, and include evidence of the translations and mistranslations of the plants' agency. In *Remains*, for example, I misinterpreted the plant's flowering as a sign of health and happiness, while it was in fact a last attempt to try and survive by propagating, as it was in distress. My inaccurate interpretation and inappropriate action taken meant that the plant died. My response, often deficient in knowledge as in this case, frequently included acts of intuition and improvisation, which were also noted in these journals. My decision to work with living things predetermined a relationship, but the realisation that this relationship between myself and the plants would form a significant part of my creative process was only understood later in the process. I realised that all the components within the garden, including myself, were working together and conversing with each other, founded on a reciprocal²³ relationship of care. Based on this realisation, I wanted to see the plants play a more active role in my creative process, and decided to explore other ways to co-operate with them.

During the performance of care, another paradox uncovered itself. Where plants are often perceived as frail and in need of continuous attention, many have proved to be strong and

²³ Throughout the creative process, I found that this nonhuman reciprocity within a relationship of care was communicated to me through the growth and responsiveness of the plants that I worked with. In the end, many of the plants collaborated with me in challenging and unexpected ways.

resilient. The perception of plants as frail enables the idea that they should be placed on a padded pedestal and that they require protection. The perception of plants as vulnerable may be understood to encourage distance, as in this mode the emphasis shifts away from the plant towards the threats that may have a negative impact on it, such as pests, which may encourage the use of pesticides. Whereas, in fact, many plants are equipped with the ability to protect themselves against pests by developing repelling chemicals (Marder 2013:69). The shift of focus away from the plant towards the threats may result in a lack of active engagement in understanding and knowing it. In the Gaian view of ecology, which emphasises the resilience of living organisms and their relations to each other, it is people who become frail and will need protection, not plants. A changed sense of the value of plants resulted from my cultivating creative process. Being immersed in the subject matter prompted careful interaction with the plants, and a shift was required between tacit learning and research.

According to Aretoulakis (2014:176), humans tend to relate to nature either through *identification* in an anthropomorphic sense or by *othering*. With identification, characteristics that are similar to humans are amplified. Alternatively, through othering characteristics that are strange or unrelatable become the basis for being enchanted and curious. Both of these strategies were employed in this study, bearing in mind the pitfalls they carry. For instance, with *identification* the characteristics of the plants that cannot be related to being human are ignored, and through *othering*, the subject might become completely unrelatable and even alien. There was also an awareness that being human, I am predisposed to step into these pitfalls, as I have done in instances. Through the creative process, it became evident that neither of these strategies are adequate on their own. Rather, it was in the shift between *identifying* and *othering* that I developed a sense of plants as individual, active and responsive.

The body of work that took shape as the *Co-create* series flowed out of a desire to involve the plants in the creative act as equal participants. The act of co-creation between the plants and the artist further dissolved the binary between nature and culture, highlighting the agency of the plants. Within the performance of *Co-create*, where I walked through plants sprayed with ink with paper strapped to my body, actors other than plants made themselves known as well. The consistency of the ink, the misting quality of the spray bottle, the position of the plant in relation to the paper, and the strength of the wind, to name a few, each influenced the outcome of the work in a unique way. The importance of the connection points between various actors and their contribution to the artwork brought Latour's ANT to life for me. When I envisioned the work, the process seemed simple. But in its execution

each actor's behaviour was different to what I assumed it would be. Ink dripped, spilled and blew onto areas I had not anticipated. Leaves and branches did not always give way to my presence in the way I imagined, and predetermined routes were not always necessarily accessible. Each resulting sketch carried the unique imprints of a specific combination of movement, ink, plant growth and paper.

From the outset, I aimed to destabilise the culture/nature binary, and in addition ended up moving closer to the source of binary relationships. Realising that I needed to emphasise the agency of plants, led me to consider objectifying practices, and exploring how subject-object relationships affect one's understanding of plant ecologies. Thereafter, I recognised that the separation between mind and body resulted in the withdrawal from all our senses other than vision, which cast the lived experience of nature, and with it an understanding of being part of it, by the wayside. It is therefore in the embodied experience, in connection with all human senses, that the Cartesian subject becomes destabilised. In this state, there is no separation between the mind and the body; they cannot be understood as separate, and the human presence is just another presence, a thing amongst a host of other things. In this state, connection and consideration of things becomes possible. Although my presence in the artwork is undeniable, I am convinced that the voice of other participants has been heard. It is in the embodied, specific, local experience of creating *The Paradoxical Garden* that connections were formed, and a different understanding was achieved; it can therefore be described as a relational artwork. The difficulty was in visualising this unseen and intuitive approach as an artwork. Instead of trying to form my ideas into an art object, I opted to select and manipulate existing things, and emphasised the way they are arranged and juxtaposed and the meanings generated. The artwork took shape in between these arrangements of things; in between the melting plastic clay plant and the soil in which it sits, and in between a whimsical plastic bubble and the thorny plant on which it rests. *The Paradoxical Garden* reflects the cohesive and conflicting intentions of the things in it, showing the care and damage caused as a result of connections within a network.

I was able to expose in my artistic practice how binary oppositions such as culture/nature, natural/artificial and subject/ object are entangled in the garden by using relational theory such as ANT and aesthetics of care. The reciprocal relationships acknowledged all components in the garden as active contributors rather than neutral or passive recipients of human agency. On the inception of this study, I argued for an understanding of nature as culture and culture as part of nature, and that a binary perception created a false sense of distance and a power imbalance between the two. I argue, along with Latour (2011) and Morton (2007), that binary relations have consequences that are problematic to the ecology.

Anthropocentric practices have placed significant strain on cultured natural resources because the vast majority of humans have in the past accepted that these are limitless resources available for consumption. Because the garden is widely acknowledged as situated on the intersection between nature as culture and culture as nature, it allowed me insights into their entanglement. My artistic practice aimed to make the most of the existing entanglement between contrasting ideas in a way that would render them as different parts of the same thing.

This study does not deny self-interest as the driving force for ethical behaviour towards other things. Being attentive – to subject as gardener, to medium as artist, to object as viewer in the process of creating *The Paradoxical Garden*, has led to several insights that increased my ecological awareness and moved me closer to ecological being. My initial quest may have been, unknowingly, a search for a new absolute, but in the end, I realised that many of the dualistic beliefs cannot be dismissed as conclusively false, but can rather be seen as small glimpses of a larger whole. As a result, I argue that particular contexts or situated experiences and relationships should be favoured instead of generalised ideas. *The Paradoxical Garden*, the result of a specific cultivating creative approach, offers closer contact with the artwork itself, rather than being contemplated from a distance. This approach results in contradiction, in accordance with the paradoxical nature of this study, where conflicting statements are valid in different situations from different perspectives. The result of ecological being in *The Paradoxical Garden* is therefore not to be equated with harmonious being. It is filled with complexity, contradiction, conflict and competition.

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