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Autor: Battista, Ludovica / Giannelloni, Elena

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LIGHT-YEARS ON THE NIGHTSTAND
Ludovica Battista, Elena Gianelloni

Fifty years ago, most of the world's population were sitting enchanted in front of the TV, sharing a common memory: the farthest men from Earth, alone on the dark side of the Moon, broadcasted live all around the globe.

A complex apparatus of narratives accompanied this event, raising questions, wills, dreams and opening up to any kind of speculation about life outside our planet. However, during this Moon-race, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had paid attention yet to turning back their satellites and contemplating the world left behind. Five missions later, *Apollo 17* finally revealed the first picture of our whole planet fully illuminated thanks to the Sun shining behind the observers: at that distance it appeared with extraordinary accuracy and nothing could seem more fascinating than the clarity of that *Blue Marble*. The Earth could finally be observed from outside, as a whole: a single and relatively small object, part of an infinitely vast and unknown system and yet intimately attached to it throughout *light-years* of distance.

Broadcasted all over the world it is no longer mysterious celestial bodies but interior wallpapers that are dazzling us these days. Since the movement of our senses has suddenly been shifted only within the physical limit of closed spaces, it becomes urgent to find something or someone to imagine other dimensions: a *near alien* who can direct our gazes deeper into them. By inducing times, spaces, scales to confrontation, this exceptional situation invites us to put them in an inevitable connection. In a universe where the human being is increasingly immersed in a direct relationship with things, deprived of all their secrets and brutally exposed, made *more visible than visible*, we can still find unexpected resources in the depths of those images that still move inside, like *fireflies* or *isolated stars*.

We must look for breaches into further universes, for intruders that might open up some space in our own. And there are, in all our indoor landscapes, small uncanny residents whose tamed otherness establishes with us an unheard dialogue made of *light*. Photosynthetic beings, decorations that suddenly crush our houses into the deep space, into the continuous interchange of matter and photons between our bedroom and the *cosmos*, our kitchen and that cargo on the ocean that transported their seeds.

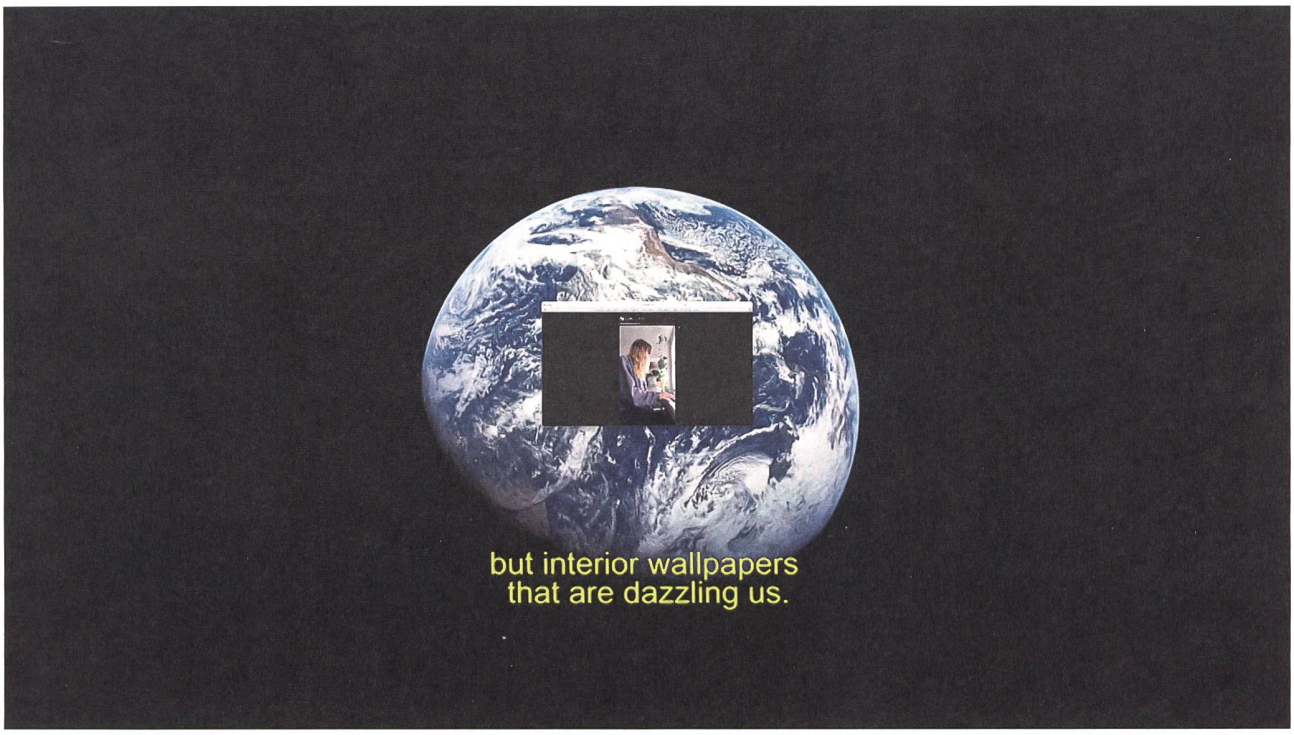
The oxygen in a room begins thousands of miles away from us: plants come from *another space* and need to be looked at not just as friendly, but also as disturbing and uncanny. Under an ornamental allure, nice leafy specimens of *Dieffenbachia* in a British living room sink their roots more into remote forests than into white polished ceramic pots and, carrying their charge of toxic crystals, should be regarded as savage wild creatures, not innocuous or indifferent at all.

We have brought into our homes exotic intruders, far from their places, lives coming from outside and filling our air, our bodies, our movements, with outlandish particles. We are used to reducing them to harmless strangers, but they do represent a disruption in our linear illusion of control towards nature in its entirety. As *black holes*, they make the wounds we inflict around us visible. As well as our houses, they populate the same halls where the powerful of the world continuously strike deals about our planet: behind their heads, on one side of their handshakes, at least one small leafed alien lives in the corner, on the table, next to a pile of international agreement papers, next to some climate summit notes, while its literal *world-making* essence surpasses the structural violence of our dominance over nature.

Lapping up sunlight, inhaling carbon dioxide, drinking in water and releasing oxygen, plants set up the material conditions for the primordial, traumatic and universal effort of every first breath of life. Photosynthesis, through which they convert light energy into chemical energy, manifests itself as an utterly magical, cosmic alchemical process that tethers earthly plant life in reverent, rhythmic attention to the Earth's solar source and to the inhale-exhale of every living being, revealing that there is only one breath between us and the universe.

Plants can then no longer be portrayed as passive beings merely driven by external agents. Instead, they are information-processing organisms with complex communication strategies, and they constantly negotiate with their biotic and abiotic environments. Their *language*, inclusively conceived, mediates these exchanges and encompasses the complexities of intersubjective and interspecies dialogue, involving both nature and humanity. It is once again about *world-making*: how beings bring forth their life-worlds in dynamic conjunction with the life-worlds of other entities. Behind the perceived immobility of plants there

A



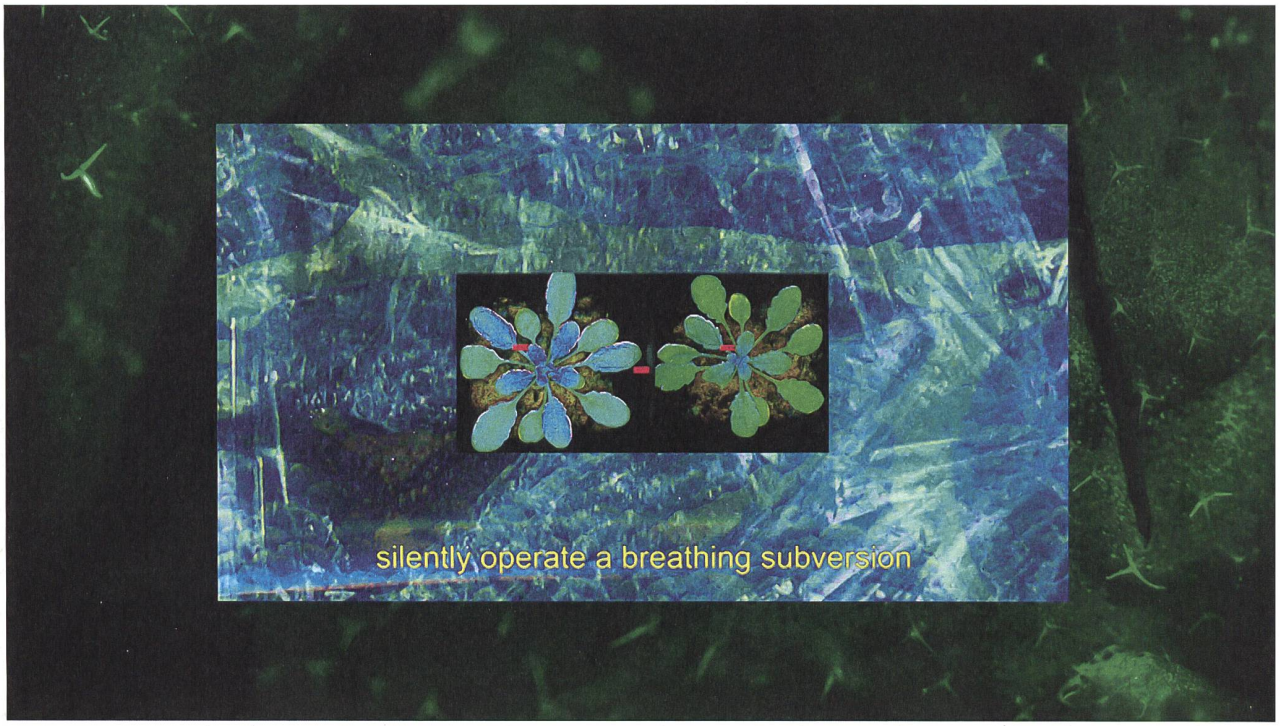
B

A *Light-Years on the Nightstand*, film still, 2020

B *Light-Years on the Nightstand*, film still, 2020

C

D



C *Light-Years on the Nightstand*, film still, 2020

D *Light-Years on the Nightstand*, film still, 2020

is a bustle of generating activity hidden from human perception. An uninterrupted stream of liquids enters the roots, rising along the stems and branching out in all directions up to the leaves, finally evaporating in resonance with the surrounding environment.

We need to recognize that plants consciously interact with our *milieu*. This raises new urgent questions about their ability to sense wounds or aggressions, prompting us to explore their biochemical strategies to handle them. As this intrinsic language remains difficult to access, despite our hermeneutic efforts, the idea of giving *rights* to plants, or *dignity*, sounds politically and philosophically disturbing to many, but humanity has a direct interest in having laws protect their living conditions and diversity. Only a truly attentive look at their behaviour can sustain us in formulating a new shared category of rights, extended to their needs, regarding them as one with ours. The *voice of plants*, their speaking in chemical tongue at ultrasonic frequencies, and our *giving of a voice to plants* involve a very careful interplay between human and vegetal voicing.

Since the language of plants is non-verbal, we must turn to its specific forms of articulation to foresee even the most rudimentary glimpse of their ways of communicating. A window is recently being opened on the possibility to translate their complex internal physiological processes through a close study of the visual patterns they are associated with, thus offering insights into the plants' language from a human perspective. There is an inherent hidden light coming from plants. The rays of the sun are not fully used for photosynthetic purposes: the surplus part is hence re-emitted by the leaves, at a wavelength that can be visualized by advanced imaging technologies. We call this luminous stream *chlorophyll fluorescence*, and it can seemingly give us the closest possible portrait of a plant's health and of its reactions to any distress. The *FLuorescence EXplorer* mission by the European Space Agency, planned for 2024, charges itself with monitoring and capturing the steady-state degree of fluorescence in terrestrial vegetation. Decades after *Project Apollo*, from nothing more than a faint glow of infrared light, we might be provided with another fundamental photograph of our planet. It will not provide such an ethereal and distant self-portrait as *Blue Marble*, yet this ephemeral luminous intermittence may shape an image of the unperceived but inherent agitation of vegetal life on Earth, encouraging us to move our attention towards a wider inter-species curiosity.

A new sensibility, so universal as to translate this extraordinary outer perspective in our ordinary inner habitats, suggests a necessary revolution in our way of caring. Close, narrow objects are actually subjects interacting with us in coded languages. Turning an absent stare at the corner into a deep, careful look, we might recognize from our sofa a small green presence between a lamp and the coffee table, and wonder if after all we – human beings – are that alone in the universe or not. Through their breathing, their speaking, their moving, in a continuous stream of actions plants come out as alive as ourselves and able to open cosmic breaches in the walls that we have built around our bodies.

This contribution comes together with a video essay, as *images*, a light-sourced tool, speak the same language as this alien and can both reveal it in a privileged way and let it tell its own universal stories. Montage then exposes these daily disruptions and dares to look through them, reporting from such extraterrestrial encounters, happening right next to the drawer, new dimensions and perspectives on our present condition.

The kilometers and commercial routes indoor plants carry with them along with all the distant radiations captured by their chloroplasts silently operate a breathing subversion of our human-centered perspective. These single, relatively small *subjects* as sun-seekers and worldly joiners, unfold from their apparently limited position a possible change in our idea of surrounding, extending it from the nearest to the farthest.

https://vimeo.com/447139399

Ludovica Battista, born 1993, is a graduate architect with an interdisciplinary approach. After graduating from Iuav University in Venice, she worked in Madrid for one year at Andrés Jaque – Office For Political Innovation. She has taken part in works exhibited internationally, such as in Venezia, Chicago, Seoul, São Paulo. Her focus lies in the intersection of visual, research and architectural fields.

Elena Gianelloni, born 1992, is a graduate architect with a territorial and research bent. After graduating from Iuav University in Venice, she worked in Paris for two years at the architecture and urbanism office l'AUC. Her previous experiences include working for the Berlin-based office June14 Meyer-Grohbrügge & Chermayeff and in the experimental practice OfficeUS of Storefront for Art and Architecture during the 14th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice.