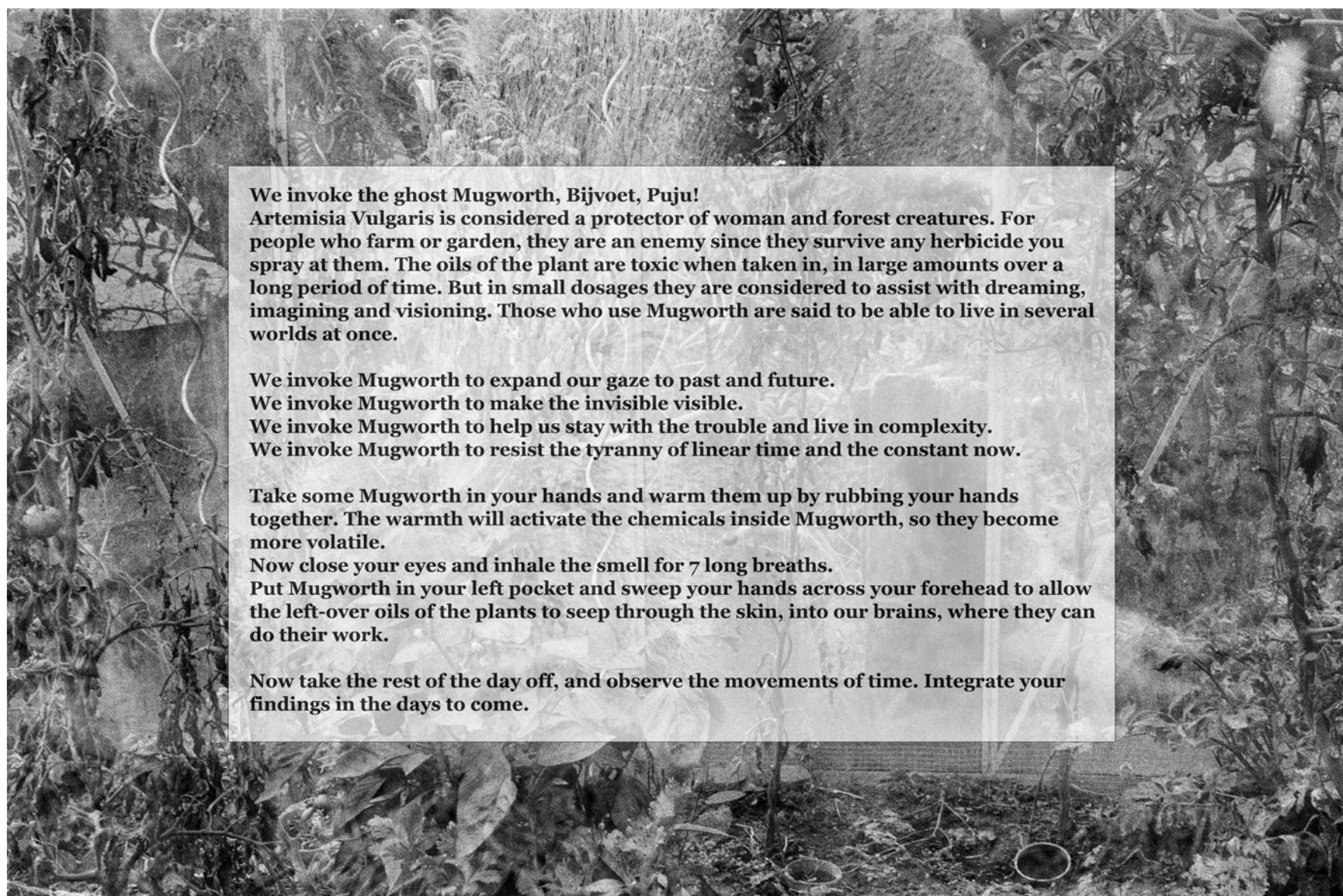


# A TIME OF PLANTS,



**We invoke the ghost Mugworth, Bijvoet, Puju!**

**Artemisia Vulgaris is considered a protector of woman and forest creatures. For people who farm or garden, they are an enemy since they survive any herbicide you spray at them. The oils of the plant are toxic when taken in, in large amounts over a long period of time. But in small dosages they are considered to assist with dreaming, imagining and visioning. Those who use Mugworth are said to be able to live in several worlds at once.**

**We invoke Mugworth to expand our gaze to past and future.**

**We invoke Mugworth to make the invisible visible.**

**We invoke Mugworth to help us stay with the trouble and live in complexity.**

**We invoke Mugworth to resist the tyranny of linear time and the constant now.**

**Take some Mugworth in your hands and warm them up by rubbing your hands together. The warmth will activate the chemicals inside Mugworth, so they become more volatile.**

**Now close your eyes and inhale the smell for 7 long breaths.**

**Put Mugworth in your left pocket and sweep your hands across your forehead to allow the left-over oils of the plants to seep through the skin, into our brains, where they can do their work.**

**Now take the rest of the day off, and observe the movements of time. Integrate your findings in the days to come.**

Image superimposed with writing  
by Ingrid Vraken. Photo courtesy  
of Rasa Alksnyte.

# A TIME OF GHOSTS

Ingrid Vraken



We live in extractivist times. The colonial-capitalist way of living is based on taking and consuming without providing for regeneration. The economist Alberto Acosta gives us the most comprehensible definition of extractivism as “those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export. Extractivism is not limited to minerals or oil. Extractivism is also present in farming, forestry and even fishing ... [It is] a mechanism of colonial and neocolonial plunder and appropriation.”<sup>1</sup> We are burning our way through fossil fuels, primary resources and human lives. Yet this drama plays out not only at the level of natural resources, but also through culture—images, references, and stories from colonized people are taken without reciprocity, used without giving their voices an actual platform, and their lives the support and justice they deserve. We spend a majority of our time as adults in ways that fuel the motor of production and consumption.

The international art world (including the performing arts) is no exception to this. Institutions organize festivals on climate change, while the politics, issues, and utopias that are brought to the stage are often not reflected in the (working) conditions and contexts in which the work is presented. There is a common tendency in the art world to perpetuate extractive practices and the abuse of power, squeezing artists and art-workers for their time, talents, and stories and to drop them when there is nothing more to exploit. This same logic leeches off the world’s natural resources without taking responsibility for the renewal of the ecosystems and the societies it takes from.

How can we live and work in regenerative ways? This question was the starting point for my project Rooted Hauntology Lab, an artistic-curatorial container in which I work with others to align what we do with how we do it. The purpose of the Lab, as an experiment and playground, is to find partial answers to the question of how to live and work in regenerative ways—working against extractive principles, not only in terms of what we present, but also how we collaborate across all levels of creation, administration, production, and communication. One way Rooted Hauntology Lab has learned to do this work is by turning toward the lessons we can learn from both ghosts and plants.

## ROOTING

I am fascinated by plants—they have developed such diverse and successful ways of existing on this planet that are completely different from how human beings live. Plants are highly collaborative and generous, both within their own species as well as through a multitude of interspecies relations with fungi, insects, and mammals.<sup>2</sup> How can I learn to become a plant? What kinds of general knowledge do plants hold that might inform our experience of time and of how we organize ourselves in our work? Which specific

plants can we call on to build more regenerative forms of being in common? I wanted to find a different strategy to engage with plants in a way that can truly challenge the automatic, anthropocentric, and romanticized associations of working with plants. I was searching for a more uncanny and uncomfortable element which could create a more powerful gesture toward the institutional arts context and could also speak to the extractivist practices I am trying to address.

This brought me to the decision to work with potted plants. Plants in pots illustrate the perversion of our current social and cultural relation to nature. To many people, potted plants are mere consumer objects, commodities, and, at worst, considered disposable. These plants are aestheticized as decor, given meaning merely through the lens of fashion and style. The countless appearances of monsteras and money trees on Instagram, and their wide availability in garden centers bear witness to this. Separated from any local ecology, these plants are celebrated for their individual physical characteristics, which get homogenized through marketing that identifies the basic properties deemed “good” for houseplants (read: commodifiable) and for the human consumer.

The marketing of these species obscures their connections to colonial histories,<sup>3</sup> not to mention the ongoing practices of genetic modification. But the violence of separation that envelopes potted plants becomes even more apparent when one thinks of how plants sustain themselves and their relations. Research has shown that plants have intricate and lively systems of communication that largely happen through their roots and mycorrhizal networks—fungal threads in the soil that intertwine with the roots of trees and plants—and allow them to exchange nutrients and information.<sup>4</sup> Potted plants are completely dependent on the care of their human “owner.” They cannot grow in search of water and minerals as they would do outside of pots. Furthermore, they are completely cut off from any possibilities of communication, community, interaction, or support. The plants become prisoners. They are stripped of the possibility to care for themselves and each other. By acquiring and working with plants in pots I am obliged to acknowledge this perverse dynamic between us from the start. There is no innocence in our coworking. I am complicit in their mis-/displacement and will have to find ways to deal with the innately oppressive nature of our relationship.

## GHOSTS

Potted plants are haunted by, and haunt us with, the absence of their ecosystem. Their capacity for communication is present but inaccessible. Their lively internal dynamics remain invisible and inaudible to our senses (at least, without technological amplification). But we need to branch out further, beyond “no longer” and “not yet,” break time and space and open it up to understand the agency of that which is “unseen” to the human eye (and therefore could be considered “virtual”) because it is other-than-human.

Jacques Derrida coined “hauntology” as a term which points to the idea that everything that exists is

1 Alberto Acosta, “Extractivism and Neoextractivism: Two Sides of the Same Curse,” in Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development (ed.), *Beyond Development: Alternative Visions from Latin America* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2013), 62–3.

2 See, for example, Suzanne Simard, Kathy Martin, Alan Vyse, and Bruce Larson, “Meta-networks of Fungi, Fauna and Flora as Agents of Complex Adaptive Systems,” in Christian Messier, Klaus J. Puettmann, and K. David Coates (eds.), *Managing Forests as Complex Adaptive Systems: Building Resilience to the Challenge of Global Change*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 133–64; Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (London: Harper Collins, 2015); Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares, *The Land Grant: Forest Law* (Lansing, MI: Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, 2014).

3 Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007).

4 See, for example, Simard 2013 and Suzanne Simard, “Mycorrhizal Networks Facilitate Tree Communication, Learning, and Memory,” in Frantisek Baluska, Monica Gagliano, and Guenther Witzany (eds.), *Memory and Learning in Plants* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 191–213.

also constructed through what it is not.<sup>5</sup> In other words, everything is defined by absence. To haunt is to be present through absence. Mark Fisher points to the importance of time when thinking about ghosts, proposing that hauntology points at a crack in time, and that the past and the future are continuously influencing, haunting, the present.<sup>6</sup>

Vegetal life is ghostly in a variety of ways. A plant sometimes takes hours or days to react to an external impulse. A tree grows throughout numerous human generations. I wonder if a cutting from a plant can be thought of as a new plant or as a continuation of the original plant, a moment where linear time branches out. Plants consist of dead parts, living parts and dying parts, often using their own decaying bodies as nutrients, bridging the seeming divide between life and death.

Simultaneously, they appear as ghosts in the limited and limiting experience of humans, who seem to have developed “plant blindness”, a cognitive bias that makes people not notice plants, and have relegated plants to the realm of invisibility.<sup>7</sup> Understanding plants as ghosts allows me to create a broader and more experiential understanding of relationality and of the various places that plants take within relational frameworks. The figure of the ghost makes it possible to account for acts and forms of agency that are visible or invisible, present, past, or future. In a haunted world, all relations matter and act.

In that sense, the ghosts of plants are diverse and multiple: from the stories they carry because they were presents from loved ones, to the various complex histories they bring to light, and to their most invisible gift, the oxygen which connects all that lives. Seeds are the ghosts of the many forms they could become, dependent on the conditions in which they will be planted. They are the ghosts of the flower they once were part of, the ghosts of the place where they were harvested, the ghosts of the intercontinental travels in colonial pasts that brought their foremothers here, the ghosts of the extinct species that used to carry them across the land, the ghosts of the technological fertilizing methods that will multiply them in the future, the ghosts of all the conditions in which they will never grow. Through exploring plants as ghosts, I wanted to bring all our unseen relations into consciousness, hoping that this will make us able to respond to them and work with them toward practices and futures that offer alternatives to those which are presented to us—the figure of the ghost represents potential and a tool for making change.

Becoming plant and ghost is a cautious and humble attempt at rehearsing different ways of relating in a time and place where this act of connecting can no longer be claimed as innocent. It is bound to fail. My work continues to point out my shortcomings, such as the difficulty to find alternatives to the anthropomorphizing of other-than-humans and the lack of ways to deal with the power relations in which we are entangled. Time and time again I would notice the use of human and other-than-human resources without the certainty of consent; I would become aware of mutual expectations, lack of money or time, audience members who might have needed more information or more

food, dying plants, rotting roots, soil that dried out, bugs that were squashed; of the fact that Facebook was used, a plane was taken, or an intern put under pressure. Thinking about myself, my work, my responsibilities through all the relations is overwhelming and unsettling. There is no easy way of navigating the haunted world we find ourselves in. But we can create spaces to exercise our attention to ghostly relations.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

6 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 18.

7 James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler, “Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness,” *Plant Science Bulletin* 47, no.1, (2001): 6–7.





Photo courtesy of Rasa Alksnyte

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