

BOTANOADOPT, A PARTICIPATORY INTERDISCIPLINARY ART PROJECT

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botanoadopt is a participatory interdisciplinary art project among art, science and social commitment. The project defines plants as independent beings and offers them for adoption on the internet. A hatch is available for the anonymous local handover of plants. The humorous contextual displacement makes it possible to question one's own definition of nature, and the adoption process establishes links with the theme of responsibility.



Fig. 1. botanoadopt plant, adoption contract | Internetplatform www.botanoadopt.org, 2011, 2009 © by 431art, living plants, website, photo: © by 431art



Fig. 2. plants hatch, 2009, © by 431art (Used with permission.), wood, aluminium, LED, 60 cm x 80 cm x 60 cm, Photo: © by 431art



Fig. 3. Internetplattform www.botanoadopt.org with feedback-photo of adopted plant, 2009, 2011 © by 431art, Feedback-photo: Pedi Matthies, © by 431art

Introduction

Botanoadopt is a participatory interdisciplinary art-project among art, science and social commitment. The project shifts perspectives by humorous recontextualizations.

Botanoadopt presents plants with charming biographies as independent individuals and offers them for adoption on the internet. A plants hatch is available for the anonymous local handover of plants. The adoption contract asks adopters to send botanoadopt photos of their fosterlings. These photos are then published at botanoadopt.org offering insights into the socio-cultural environments of the whereabouts of the plants.

The humorous recontextualizations allow to question one's own definition of nature, and the adoption process insinuates the topic of responsibility. Botanoadopt draws on alternative economic models of exchange and donation.

Thus the issue of environmentally responsible behaviour is investigated via models derived from realms beyond the boundaries of art.

Keyrole of plants, artistic statement and strategy

“Never before has the extinction of species been as massive as today. If this development will continue, it is to be feared that within a shortest period of time flora and fauna will shrink by 60-90%.” [1] At the same time plants from all over the world are merchandised as mere decoration items. Several stores offer them very cheap and as a consequence plants are seen and treated as disposables.

Here, at this massive discrepancy botanoadopt comes into play. In merchandise management systems plants are regarded and used as decoration, as food and as supplier of material resources. Woodlands formerly considered as inviolable and to be protected are more and more subject to economic interests. Botanoadopt subverts this political and economical system by defining plants as individual beings and by taking them out of the circulation of commodities. As a result, the only possibility to obtain a botanoadopt plant is by way of adoption.

Botanoadopt is a participatory art-project with the aim of rethinking our idea of nature as such. Plants are playing a keyrole on our planet. They could live without human beings easily. Conversely, men are not able to survive on planet earth without plants. The artistic statement of botanoadopt is: plants are individuals with their own independent perception.

Plants interact with their surrounding in a very sensitive way. For example, they react extremely sensitively to negative thoughts. The book “The Secret Life of Plants” [2] explores the concept that plants may have sensations, despite their lack of a nervous system and a brain. To prove this the authors, Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, describe several scientific experiments and evoke a deeper understanding of plant life.

This undergirds our artistic theses: Every plant is to be seen as an individual being with its own perception, its own name and its individual biography. This biography deals with social, emotional, economic or ecological aspects. With the adoption project we are blurring the line between fact and fiction, in order to broaden the perspective, to leave behind common definitions of nature, to open avenues of thought leading to new and individual concepts of nature.

After having rescued several plants from the trash heap in the year 2006, we clearly became aware, that a basic knowledge about plants is not part of our general education anymore. Withered plants are thrown away even if they were able to live on for years to come. Usually, they just need a short recovery time – a normal and necessary process within the cycle of nature. The daily life of industrial societies is no longer connected with these cycles. We think that this loss of being involved into the cycles of nature and the imperative of our capitalist society to be productive all the time and everywhere while ignoring the current critical environmental situation, is the main cause of the immense social and environmental problems of our planet.

Saving plants and giving them up for adoption with name and biography is our strategy, that people become aware of their own definition of nature and behavior. Even a small house plant which could be bought very cheap and easily is a living being.

baseline shifts and modules of botanoadopt

BOTANIA

In 2006 we founded the plants village "Botania". Its name refers to the free city-state "Christiania," [3] which is part of Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark. "Christiania" was founded in 1971. It is a self-regulated state without police forces. Its peoples' aim is to live in peace with each other and in harmony with nature. This idea is strongly influenced by the hippie movement. Accordingly, in "Botania" plants can recover from their sufferings and bad treatments. "Botania" can as well be seen as a symbol for the utopia of living together in peace.

INTERNETPLATFORM BOTANOADOPT.ORG

Nowadays life is deeply influenced by digital technology. So our aim was to realise our main idea with the aid of Internet technology, not only as a means to advertise the project all over the world, but also as a means to help nature. The Internet platform botanoadopt.org was launched at the beginning of 2009 and is a digital interactive network to organize a different and sustainable future society.

The website offers plants for adoption (Fig. 1). Plants handed in from all over Germany are given a name, a biography and an ID picture. The biographies inform about family background, preferences and the respective relationship patterns of the plant individuals. These biographical profiles play a key role in our project and exemplarily exhibit our artistic approach: the humorous shifting of contexts.

Succulent "Edward Tomlinson," [4] a plant of Argentinean origin, grew up in London and has been training Polo since he was a little child. He founded one of the first botanic Polo teams in Great Britain. This team did its secret nightly training in the Royal Botanic Gardens until unfortunately several windowpanes got broken by a club. The incident was never cleared up. Nevertheless the players moved their activities to Richmond Park, became the world's best botanic Polo team and arranged tournaments in the Hyde Park once a year. With a handicap of +7, "Edward" is among the best players of his age and committed himself to achieve the official recognition of plants as professional Polo players. Furthermore, he is interested in Sinology and has a liking for red-white checked ties. Edward found a new home in Huddasfield, UK.

Money tree "Lehman" [5] is a latecomer and the youngest of four brothers. He left his extremely materialistically orientated family very early and tried to become a stand-up comedian. Due to certain language barriers and his appearance the audience regarded him as stopgap. But he kept his life's motto: "Humour is laughing in spite of it all!". Against his wish he was brought into a casino and explored the rules of successful gambling. He internalized them and now he helps everyone close to him to gain material wealth that is based on natural growth. Eventually, a leading employee of a German financial institution at Frankfurt/Main adopted "Lehman".

At the end of 2009 an article about botanoadopt and "Lehman" whose name and biography refers to the Lehman Brothers and the crash of the financial market was published by in the German version of the "Financial Times". This article is an example, how deep botanoadopt is interwoven with contemporary society beyond the strong boundaries of art.

Botanoadopt is an entirely non-commercial project. The "currency" adoptive parents have to pay is responsibility. The adoption is regulated by a contract and the adopting person undertakes to send a photo of his protégé to botanoadopt twice a year. These photos are published on the web, so that every visitor can follow the development not only of the adopted plants, but also of the sociocultural environment that is partially documented in the photographs.

WEBSITE AS ADOPTION PLATFORM AND POOL OF KNOWLEDGE

One can easily apply for adoption by an online form. Available plants can be found by full text research and postal code. A checklist [6] for plant adoption offers an aptitude test to every potential adoptive parent. More than 350 plants have already been adopted; most of them live in Germany and some others all over Europe.

In general, the adoptive parents pick up the plant themselves – residence and first digit of the postal code are published on botanoadopt.org, so that plants in your area can be easily found and selected (Fig. 3). Adoptiv parents collect their fosterling at the plant owners home. In this way people independently from their origin, education, religion or social status meet each other. In rare cases plants will be sent by mail or by organizing a lift. On botanoadopt.org it is also possible to put plants up for adoption, a service that has been used by people from all over Germany.

The website offers a huge and versatile pool of knowledge and tagged articles, as well as online-databases on plants and biodiversity. This collection is constantly updated and can be consulted under "Fakten." Thus, botanoadopt.org can also be used as a knowledge base. In addition to biological facts about plants, many more facts about genetic engineering, farming, scientific research, new European laws or biodiversity can be found. Eventually, links to other non-commercial organisations, networks and projects are provided, that altogether aim at a new view of nature. The virtual platform contains a wide range of topics around our central theme plants life.

The page "Media" is linked to documentaries and reports like for instance a documentary film about Monsanto [7] or a report about "Smart Plants" (both ARTE). A "Forum" can be used for knowledge exchange. The whole project combines online- and offline strategies. It brings together global concerns with local actions as well as digital technologies with plants life. Conversely, locally based actions are always announced and documented on the Internet platform and published by using social networks as facebook and twitter. As we implemented the translation tool of Google on our website, botanoadopt can be visited from all over the world.

PLANTS-HATCH

Independently from the Internet, we also wanted to create a space where everyone can hand in his unwanted plant anonymously and without restrictions, instead of throwing it away. Consequently we invented the "Pflanzenklappe" (plants hatch) in which unwanted plants can be put into similar to the

human baby hatch (Fig. 2). The "Pflanzenklappe" takes place at different locations for only a short period of time of 10 up to 14 days. Its idea is derived from the baby hatch, which is very popular in Germany and Japan too. Baby hatches can be linked to the former parochial custom to care about anonymous babies abandoned from mothers in trouble. Those babies were usually left in wicker baskets at church entrances.

The idea of altruism, which is anchored in every religious system, leads to the ethical code of caring about others, particularly about persons with physical infirmities, disabilities or maladies; this code also includes the requirement to pay respect to old persons. Accordingly, adopting a plant or using the plants hatch is an act that shows respect for plants and their invaluable capability to clean our air, to nourish us, to provide resources and medicine, which helps us to relax, to smell good and to have fun.

In February 2009 the worldwide first plants hatch was officially unveiled in Schöppingen by its mayor. The word "Pflanzenklappe" led to more than 100.000 Google-entries within 10 days. Journalists from all over the world were reporting about the plants hatch. The plants hatch 2009 and 2010 was mounted in different districts of Frankfurt/Main and in September 2010 in the botanical garden of Münster. During a period of 10 days, more than 150 plants were left in the plants hatch.

ON-SITE ACTIVITIES

Furthermore, botanadopt arranges regular on-site activities and performances in different cities, e.g. adoption offices and empathy trainings. Adoption offices were installed so far in Frankfurt, Berlin, Cologne, Schöppingen, Münster, Dortmund and London. In 2011 an adoption office offered its services at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The empathy trainings offer "trainees" the opportunity to test their capacity to be empathetic and – at best – to develop and increase it.

BANNWALD - A FOREST MIGRATION

Another botanadopt activity was the "Bannwald-Migration" at Kelsterbach close to Rhein-Main-Airport in February 2009. With the help of proactive supporters botanadopt saved 34 beech tree seedlings from a "Bannwald", that faced clearing because of preparing works for a new airstrip.

In Germany a "Bannwald" [8] is a forest that is protected by law and has to be maintained in any case. The "Bannwald" near Frankfurt was protected by law since the early 1980s as a result of the protests against the runway "Startbahn West," [9] which was being built in a former forest. In 2009, 25 years later, this "Bannwald" had to disappear in order to clear space for another runway.

2009 the company was really well prepared, the whole building area was surrounded by fences and protected by the police. Therefore, botanadopt decided to intervene tactically and create a catch-22: We successfully managed to pass the police barriers unchecked, gained access to the area and collected a big bag of young beech trees, while nature activists were living in tree houses to save the forest.

Finally, botanadopt succeeded to shift 31 of them to the grounds of a foundation in Schöppingen, where a new forest was created – a site-specific artwork called "Bannwald". The mayor of Schöppingen adopted another three beech tree seedlings.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE

botanoadopt saved more than 350 plants since 2009. Most of them were given away anonymously by using the plants-hatch. These plants live in their new homes in Germany and other European countries. In general plants could be adopted by using our Internetplatform or in locally based adoption-offices, f.e. 2011 in front of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. In 2012 we plan to install the plants-hatch accompanied by adoption-offices f.e. in Cologne. Furthermore we are developing an interdisciplinary participatory education concept, which will start 2012.

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