



Fig. 1. Giovanni Aloï, *Dodder*, *Chicago North Shore #2*, Summer 2024

## This is not a Fairy Tale

*Giovanni Aloi, Monica Gagliano*

This conversation arises from our shared experience at a conference presentation about Pierre Huyghe's acclaimed *Liminal* exhibition at Punta della Dogana in Venice, from March 17th to November 24th, 2024. As we sat in the audience listening, we each felt a dissonance between the exhibition's aesthetics, content, and philosophies, and the kinds of stories we deem more urgent and productive today. We began to question what kind of aesthetics might be better suited to advance our conversations, which topics and modalities of engagement should be prioritized, and how urgency plays into it all, in the context of climate change, the sixth mass extinction, and the current lack of political commitment on a global scale.

*Giovanni Aloi:* Viewing the presentation brought me back to how I felt when I left the exhibition last summer – I was puzzled by its dark, apocalyptic tone; the portrayal of animals and their confinement in alienating enclosures like fish tanks. Darkened

and cold, the cavernous gallery spaces evoked a sense of existentialist loss, separation, and impotence – feelings of detachment and a lack of empathy framed this apocalyptic backdrop. I remember walking outside the museum, blinded by the intensity of the Venetian sun speckling off the lagoon water. I felt anxious, hollow, and even hopeless. You, Monica, seemed to have a strong reaction to the works that were being presented as well. I've been thinking for a while about the conversation we could have had if there had been more time at the conference. I think we both sensed a strong urgency in expressing dissent. This wasn't one of those moments where we felt, especially you, that it was best to let things pass without comment, or that there shouldn't be a response – a constructive one, at least. Critical, constructive feedback seemed necessary, but unfortunately, there just wasn't enough time to fully articulate it within the structure of the conference. So, when the invitation to contribute to this issue of *L'Uomo Nero Green* presented itself I instantly thought of you and how we might use this space to give shape to our concerns in a constructive way that might also help others to navigate their practices and approaches.

*Monica Gagliano:* Well, first of all, when I was present at the conference, my feelings were quite different from what you described, especially your emotional response when you visited the actual exhibition in Venice. You mentioned feelings of hollowness and a lack of empathy, but I had none of those feelings. For me, my response was much more about boredom and frustration. It was like, "This is so boring". I kept thinking, "Why am I wasting my time with this?" And then I felt a deep sense of annoyance – not so much because of the lack of empathy, but rather the lack of creativity. And this, I think, ties directly into my frustration.

I must admit, I have certain expectations when it comes to art. In my mind, artists should be pushing boundaries, offering new ideas, and making me think in ways I've never thought before. But what was presented felt so clichéd and predictable. There was nothing surprising in the apocalyptic tone, nothing inventive about it. And that's where my annoyance came from – art should provoke, challenge, and inspire new ways of thinking. When it fails to do that, it feels like it's wasting its potential.

What struck me even more is that, at this particular moment in the history of our species, there are vast opportunities for art – and the humanities in general – to contribute to a broader conversation. Art has the power to tell urgent, different stories that feel timely and necessary, stories that science can't always deliver. As a scientist, I know how long it can take to collect data and build a case for a story. But art, in a way, can be far more immediate, more direct, and often, even more powerful than science in addressing the pressing issues of our time. It can open up creative possibilities and spark new perspectives in a way that science, with its methodical pace, sometimes can't match. The potential for art to tell these transformative stories felt wasted. And when I saw that opportunity being squandered, yeah, it frustrated me.

And the reason why it felt wasted for me was because, as we already said during our conversation at the conference, what I saw was a repetition of ideas that have been explored in sci-fi over fifty or sixty years ago. To me, this is a key issue: it wasn't offering anything new. It wasn't innovating or challenging the status quo. It felt like the exhibition was offering more of the same, an unnecessary dystopian future we don't even want. And this, I believe, connects to the sense of hollowness you mentioned. What was on display seemed like a reflection of our desperation for new answers, but in-

stead, it gave us more of what we already know. The story presented was stagnant, offered a vision of a future that is actually old and reminded me that this is precisely *not* what we need.

It reminds me of how things can work in science too. Sometimes, if you're a well-established scholar, you can get away with presenting something just because of your reputation, without necessarily adding anything new or valuable. The fact that something is familiar or widely accepted doesn't make it insightful. Simply recycling what we already know isn't enough. And that's exactly how I felt about the exhibition – it didn't offer me anything new or meaningful. Instead, it reinforced that we're still stuck in a cycle of repetition. What we need now, both in art and science, is the courage to break free from that cycle. Art, in its most powerful form, should push us to question the status quo, to imagine new possibilities, and to help us envision a different, more meaningful future.

*GA:* I agree with you. As the talk unfolded, I kept hoping that maybe some new perspectives or ideas that I hadn't considered might emerge – maybe I had missed something? But, as it turned out, that wasn't the case, which left me feeling dissatisfied again. That said, I want to defend Pierre Huyghe, at least in part. He has created much more engaging ecological work in the past, work that isn't as bleak or apocalyptic. The majority of the pieces in the exhibition were part of the Pinault collection. So, what we saw was primarily what Pinault, a very wealthy collector, owned, with a few additional works added to complement. I think it is fair to say that more than artist's own unencumbered expression, the exhibition seemed to be framed through the lens of a businessman's taste, which brings its own set of aesthetic choices.

I remember seeing another exhibition by Huyghe at the Centre Pompidou back in 2013, and it was very different – playful and colorful. His iconic, white Ibizan hound with a pink-painted leg ironically called “human” walked freely around the exhibition. It felt like part of this non-human presence that challenged the idea that art has to be static or lifeless. But, as you said, it’s the only message that was conveyed, and unfortunately, it felt out of step with the times we live in – or perhaps too aligned with them in a negative way? But it triggered a series of important questions for us. What kind of art do we need today? What stories should be told, and why? How do we tell them, and what materials are available to us to make these as effective as possible?

There’s an ethical dimension to how we approach storytelling. What boundaries do we have to work within, and how can we transcend them? I think you’re an excellent example of someone who navigates these complexities. Coming from Italy, living in Australia, being a scientist and working with Indigenous cultures, you embody the challenge of bridging different fields, disciplines, and cultures. There’s a key question in how we balance our professional roles, our institutional boundaries, and the need to break free from old structures. To do justice to subjects like the more-than-human, plants, and ecology, we need to create new structures and methodologies, and I think you’re someone who is uniquely positioned to explore those possibilities. We need to be brave in mapping out new ideas that are important, relevant, and useful. I know I’m throwing around these terms, and feel free to disagree if you don’t feel that I am doing justice to our previous exchange. But I do believe there’s such an interesting and rich terrain to explore here.

*MG:* Yeah, first of all, thank you for revitalizing my impression of this artist. As you know, my experience with his work was limited to what was presented at the conference. If that’s all I knew, then that’s the impression I was left with. But hearing your perspective, I see there’s much more depth to his work than what was shown.

The idea of the dog with the pink leg running around in the exhibition is actually quite inspiring from a conceptual standpoint. It’s revolutionary in how it breaks boundaries. The dog moves freely through the space, challenging the traditional boundaries between human and more-than-human entities. It makes those perceived barriers porous, allowing a dynamic interaction that isn’t typically seen in these contexts. This concept pushes art into a more fluid, engaging realm of possibility.

As a scientist, I resonate with this on a deeper level. In science, we tend to separate and classify everything – categorizing and isolating to understand. Science is the quintessential separator. But introducing something unexpected, like a dog with a pink leg, challenges this structure. In science, a dog with a pink leg would be an anomaly that doesn’t fit established norms. Yet in art, this anomaly becomes a potent opportunity to rethink boundaries.

In my own work, I’ve been trying to show that these boundaries are more porous than we think. It’s not about rigid divisions, but about making those porous boundaries visible and allowing them to “contaminate” our thinking. This is what the artist does by introducing a more-than-human presence in the space – the dog with the pink leg. By doing so, he shows us that the lines between the human and more-than-human, the living and the objectified, are not as clear-cut as we’ve been led to believe.

I’ve been working in a similar way with plants. How to move our perception be-

yond seeing them merely as *objects* of study or *subjects* for scientific analysis. They are neither. They're living entities with their own perceptions, agendas, and ways of experiencing the world. Science has shown this time and again – take animal perception, for example. We once studied animal vision based on human systems, only to realize they perceive the world very differently. This shift in perspective reminds us that we inhabit diverse worlds that we can't fully understand.

Their perception of the world is a different world altogether. Recognizing this means acknowledging that there are solutions outside our human perception – solutions that might be accessible to plants or the dog with the pink leg. Through the eyes of these more-than-human entities, we may discover insights that human perception cannot access. The way a plant or a dog experiences the world could reveal possibilities that we are blind to.

This is where art and science both have a crucial role: in broadening our understanding by inspiring each other. The artist challenges us to rethink boundaries, and I aim to do the same in science. It's not about blending art and science, but embracing the porousness between them. Knowledge can come from unexpected sources – plants, or other more-than-human entities. The dog with the pink leg, then, is more than just a symbol – it's a powerful reminder of the creative potential that emerges when we break down the walls between different ways of knowing and being in the world.

GA: Yes, I think these are questions that many artists and philosophers have also been exploring over time. One concept that has gained traction in philosophy over the past ten to fifteen years is speculative realism. The idea behind it is that, even if we can't definitively prove that something exists or demonstrate that a plant feels –

for instance – we can still open up a speculative space in which to contemplate and entertain possibilities rather than outright denying them. This contrasts with the traditional philosophical stance that dismissed the potential of plants for feeling, for example. As you know, artists have seriously engaged with this challenge – one that's rich with potential.

Instead of viewing the “darkness” of unknowing or uncertainty as unproductive, as science has often done by placing things beyond its scope, speculative darkness can be a space where something generative happens; a space of potentiality. That's where I think speculative realism thrives. It's like an invitation to explore the unknown while reminding ourselves of our cognitive and perceptual limitations.

I realize that we deploy aesthetics in everything we do, whether through painting, writing, or even our voice as a form of expression. I thought about this when reflecting on the darkness in Huyghe's *Liminal* exhibition. When I left the gallery, I felt overwhelmed by how dark it was. Black was the dominant color everywhere inside the galleries. Spaces were dimly lit and made you feel disoriented. One gallery had gravel on the floor, so that every step felt even more uncertain and unsteady.

That experience made me reflect on the difference between the kind of darkness presented in the exhibition and the “darkness” of speculative realism. The darkness in the exhibition felt negatively grounded in humanist constructions, as it's often understood in a humanist context. In contrast, the darkness of speculative realism invites us to dwell in the more-than-human-unknown and craft new aesthetics and languages, to explore with our eyes closed and let hearing, touch, and feeling lead the way instead. It's an invitation to an open-ended exploration be-



Fig. 2. Giovanni Aloï, *Dodder*, *Chicago North Shore #5*, Summer 2024

yond the traditional western conceptions of what something should be.

This made me think about critical plant studies, too, and how sometimes there's a tendency to cast plants in an overly positive light, to anthropomorphize them or make them seem benevolent. I understand why we might want to see plants in that way, but I also think that approach can be problematic. We do not respect the alterity of their darkness. This issue isn't just confined to plant studies – it's something I've encountered in animal studies as well. And, honestly, it frustrates me. I know the temptation to create structures, even with-

in academia, that give credibility to our work, but at the same time, I worry that in doing so, we risk simplifying or idealizing our subject of scrutiny too much. In the case of plants, this often manifests in ideas like the “mother tree” concept by Suzanne Simard or the ideas explored by Peter Wohlleben in *The Hidden Lives of Trees*, which tend to anthropomorphize plants in a way that borders on the overly sentimental and certainly squarely in the camp of anthropomorphic relations. In these instances, a fine line separates science from fiction, and I think it's a conversation that needs more careful consideration.

*MG:* I think it's an interesting point, but concepts like these have become somewhat mainstream, and in the process, they've lost some of their initial potency. When ideas like the vegetal turn first emerged, it was a radical shift. There was a real need to start seeing plants and non-human entities differently, which I fully support. But now, it feels like we're losing some nuance, and the conversation has turned into more of a trend.

I've been accused of anthropomorphizing my plants too. But what does it really mean to anthropomorphize? By attributing human qualities to non-human entities, we assume we understand what it means to be human in the first place. This raises important questions about the limitations of our own perspectives.

Ultimately, we are human, and we can't escape seeing the world through human eyes. We inevitably interpret non-human entities through our lens. The question isn't whether we anthropomorphize (which, I think, can help us empathize, and that's ultimately a good thing) but how we acknowledge and navigate this limitation. Our perceptions are shaped by our humanity, *and* we don't need to be confined by it. This is where science often falls short. Science distances the observer from the object of study, creating a separation. But that separation creates a blind spot. It doesn't allow for a deeper engagement with the immanence of the more-than-human world. The kind of "absence" this creates doesn't bring us closer to the true nature of the world we seek to understand.

On the other hand, there's the possibility of transcending our perspective. This is what's required in both science and art. It takes courage to set aside a comfortable perspective and step into the unknown. It's about using imagination and empathy to engage with what's not immediately present, the productive darkness you mentioned.

This is the kind of darkness that art creates – an open space to explore. Concepts like the "mother tree" or plants as purely benevolent beings are valuable in their context, but we must be ready to transcend them. They are part of a beginning, but they are immature, in the sense that they are incomplete. Our understanding of the more-than-human world is still maturing. My experience with a large tree in the Amazon helped me realize this. The tree had a dual nature – it could heal or harm, depending on how you approached it. Some people are more permissive, others more rigid. The tree had its own set of rules. It wasn't purely benevolent. It required me to meet it where it was.

When I first approached the tree, I had a romanticized view of it as a benevolent teacher. But the tree showed me not just its goodness but also its darker side, because I wasn't fully attuned to its nature. It wasn't until I clarified my intentions – wanting to engage with healing on a planetary scale – that everything shifted. The tree required me to align with its full nature, not just my idealized version of it. Then, the tree responded differently, as if it was saying, "You should have just said so". It was a great reminder that the world is complex, and we must meet it where it is in whole of its complexity.

*GA:* Indeed! And what does healing mean in the context of where we are, what we do, and the state of the planet? I think that's a crucial question in this conversation because, at its core, lies the idea of purpose. In a way, we're circling around questions like "why do we write?", "what is writing for?", and "how should we approach writing?"

*MG:* Yes, I absolutely agree. My visit to the Amazonian tree I mentioned brought this question into sharp focus for me. I found

myself asking the tree, “How may I serve this moment, this humanity, with the skills I possess?” Reflecting on the exhibition in Venice – where, as you noted, everything felt so compartmentalized, divided, and dark – I realized that healing isn’t about erasing barriers altogether. Rather, it’s about raising awareness of the barriers that exist: recognizing which boundaries are vital and protective, and which have been arbitrarily constructed and no longer serve the greater good. Just consider our own bodies: without boundaries like our skin, we’d be nothing more than a shapeless mass. Yet if our skin were sealed too tightly, we’d suffocate. In other words, some boundaries are indispensable because they serve the whole system. Ultimately, healing means cultivating a collective awareness of which boundaries truly benefit us all – and which only serve individual interests.

Too often, we prioritize what serves the individual first, treating any benefit to the whole as merely a bonus. And when something fails to serve the collective, we dismiss it as unimportant. I believe much of our current predicament stems from this misalignment – the very fabric of our system is breaking down because our boundaries are not serving the whole.

GA: That’s interesting! Everything you’ve been saying made me think about a plant that I encountered for the first time last year in a prairie around Chicago. It’s called dodder (*Cuscuta*).

MG: Yes, It’s a parasitic plant!

GA: Yes! I was walking in the countryside outside Chicago when I noticed a strange mesh of orange threads sprawling across an expanse of plants. It was in a nature preserve, so at first, I assumed the caretakers had laid down some kind of netting for conservation purposes. It looked

artificial, almost rubber-like. But as I got closer, I realized it was something else entirely – a plant?!

Curious, I looked it up and discovered it was dodder. But I didn’t fully grasp how remarkable this plant was until I returned to the same field a couple of months later and saw it in bloom! The tangled web of threads had coiled around its host plants, reaching for the sky, and from that entanglement, delicate white flowers, clustered together, had emerged. At first, I was confused. I thought, “What is this flower doing in the middle of this plant’s stem?” The host plants were a type of native rudbeckia so the white blooms scattered around their stems, midway up seemed highly incongruous. Then I realized the dodder had adapted, making itself almost unrecognizable. When I returned again, a few weeks later, the host plant was dead – wilted, collapsed – while the dodder’s flowers were still thriving.

I started reading more about the plant, and while my understanding is still developing, I became fascinated by the speculative ideas around dodder’s behavior. It’s a parasitic plant, yes – but is “parasite” even the right word? Language gets complicated here. Dodder feeds on others, but then again, so do we. It made me wonder – how do I “feed” on others in ways I might not be fully aware of? We all take from something, whether we recognize it or not. It made me think about how so many people are still unaware or unclear about how colonialism still feeds our lives today, hundreds of years after it began. Or even about the destruction that energy we take for granted in our homes causes elsewhere, faraway.

But then things with dodder became much more complex and fascinating: one theory I came across suggested that dodder might chemically signal to its host plant, essentially tricking it into recognizing dodder as part of itself. At that point, there’s no

clear boundary between the two – the host plant doesn't fight back because, in a way, it no longer perceives the dodder as "other". The two slowly merge. It's no longer "dodder *and* the host" – something new has emerged, a singular/plural whole – a combination of vegetal beings that perhaps transcends our conception of species. And in that merging, ideas of good and bad begin to crumble too.

Of course, over time, the host may weaken and die, while the dodder moves on to another plant. And here we run into another linguistic trap – words like "colonize" carry heavy connotations. But what if, instead of seeing this as an act of destruction and exploitation, as colonialist lenses would imply, we considered it through a different vantage point? There's something undeniably poetic about this process – something even beautiful and yet unsettling. It's a kind of becoming that resists our conventional categories; one that violently disrupts our epistemological ethics. We feel urged to judge it, to label it, to decide whether it benefits the whole. But maybe it just *is*. And maybe our role isn't to impose meaning, but to witness.

*MG:* This brings to mind how we often romanticize plants as symbols of oneness – a way of transcending duality, where two separate entities merge into a unified whole. Yet our vision of oneness is skewed by our expectations. We insist that this transcendence must look a particular way. As we've noted before, our anthropocentric perspective forces us to see the world through a human lens, and we can only anthropomorphize what we observe. In doing so, we overlook that what we call "colonizing" might actually be a beautiful, natural process. We tend to view it as negative, but what if the concepts of negative and positive simply don't apply? This is a call for us to transcend our limit-

ed, polarized view. That doesn't mean that we remove polarization or dualities, but we have the capacity to grow into seeing the world from different perspectives. For example, imagine what it would be like to view the world as the dodder does. When I was working in the Amazon, I encountered plants that behaved much like dodder – engaging in what might be seen as colonization. I wouldn't be surprised if we could even engage in a dialogue with such a plant, asking, "Can you teach me how you do this?" The plant, in its very dodder way, challenges our conventional ideas and invites us to reconsider what we classify as negative.

When we observe from a separate, human perspective, it seems natural to label this behavior as purely negative. Yet, what if the dodder plant has something valuable to teach us – offering a perspective that transcends our usual binaries? Perhaps the dodder is useful in ways we haven't even begun to imagine. Rather than simply seeing it as a parasite that drains its host, consider that when the dodder eventually dies, it might leave behind a nutrient-rich legacy that sparks regeneration and nurtures new growth. If we restrict our view to isolated data points, of course we are judging it for what we think we see, but we risk missing what's really happening, the full, dynamic process unfolding in nature.

*GA:* Sometimes, fine-tuning scientific concepts is about balancing what we see with what remains hidden. If you look back three hundred years, you'd find ideas that modern science would call impossible. And yet, with new technology and approaches, we suddenly uncover new dimensions and relations – and you have to wonder, what else are we missing?

Take the dodder, for instance. Its slender stems stretch from one host plant to another, not merely blurring the boundaries

between them, but actually fusing with each host. In doing so, the dodder creates a network – a kind of living web where nutrients and signals are shared by different plants. It struck me as if we were looking at one giant, interconnected organism, spanning multiple species.

A recent study by Claude dePamphilis even suggested that this interconnection might be more than parasitism; it could be a symbiotic relationship where plants support each other by sharing nutrients and information. Of course, in this type of symbiosis one agent might be benefitting more than the other, but what if a host plant, even as it withers, manages to complete a different kind of life cycle – one that does not have to follow a prescriptive model? What if its seemingly unfulfilled life has nonetheless sustained and enriched the soil, provided food for birds and other insects, offered shelter? It's a challenge to our Western notion that an early death is something to be pitied.

I see something beautiful in this process. We all have these ideas about a dignified end – nobody really wants to hit ninety-five with failing teeth and a rotten leg. But perhaps, instead, there's grace in an ending that's woven into a greater, interconnected plurality of life. It makes you think: why should our final moments be dictated by a world that insists on one "proper" way to die? Maybe, just maybe, there's a lesson here about finding beauty and meaning in what at first seems unsavory – a reminder that even in decay, life can transform into something remarkable.

*MG:* Death is a big theme for me as well because I find that, well, most of us are just completely terrified is the only real ceremony that we have to do because birth is not guaranteed, but once you are here, death is guaranteed. So that ceremony is for everyone, and most of us arrive to it very ungrace-

ful. Yeah, I agree. I fulfill my purpose as an organism in this web of interaction and relationships because nature is actually quite parsimonious. She doesn't, so why would she keep me hanging around when I'm done with. Off you go. And I don't mean that we should just make people work all their life in factories, and when they finish working they're no longer useful, then we can dump them, which is what our system does. I don't mean what I am saying to be interpreted in a functionalist narrow way.

*GA:* I understand, but that's the slippery slope, especially when we think about the messages we're sending; the appropriateness of stories and how to tell them. I just realized, listening to you, that I'm attaching an implicit importance to death that I need to further explore. Every time you say something, there's a bit of deconstruction that shows me my own biases. I link reproduction with this sense of positivity – like if the plant manages to reproduce, that's a good sign or a sign of success that life is flowing in the right direction. But maybe that's not even what truly matters. Maybe what really matters is that the plant provided nectar for pollinators, that pollen got spread anyway, and that its dead matter went back into the soil, making it fertile. It doesn't have to reproduce to have lived a life worthy of existing or to have "lived it to the fullest". I think we're obsessed with that idea, and it clouds our value systems in all sorts of ways.

*MG:* This makes me want to push the idea even further. Take the dodder and the rudbeckia: suppose the rudbeckia is being killed prematurely, so it never reproduces or even flowers. From my perspective, I might say, "Oh, what a shame – what a waste of a rudbeckia, a flower, a plant". But what if the true significance lies in its experience from the moment it sprouted to the

moment it was finished off? What if that unique experience was exactly what the dodder captured and shared? It might have been something truly special – belonging to that one individual *rudbeckia* alone – and by being shared, it enriches the whole. What if that is the entire purpose?

In that sense, does it really matter if Monica dies at sixty or a hundred, so long as the experience of being alive has contributed something meaningful to the larger system? Maybe that's all that's required. We don't necessarily have to reproduce, flower, or accomplish any particular goal. Perhaps simply existing – being an expression of life and having our life shared and witnessed by the system we're part of – is enough.

*GA:* I really like the idea that plants can offer a kind of quiet resistance to our rigid perspectives, helping us accept change in a way that feels organic rather than forced. I also get what you're saying about hope. It can feel like a hollow word, a kind of placeholder for something we can't fully articulate. Maybe the stories we need aren't about hope in the traditional sense, but about *how to live* – how to navigate uncertainty, contradiction, and transformation without needing to categorize everything as good or bad.

Would you say you're more interested in stories that help us sit with discomfort rather than ones that offer resolution?

*MG:* And maybe it is because of our background, it's just like, but there is another word that I really like and it's got a totally different potency, at least for me. And it's trust that is quite different than hope and trust, apart from the fact that it shares the etymology with truth. And so there is something about when you learn to trust that you are, everything is exactly as it's supposed to be. The dodder is doing the dodder thing, and if

nature didn't need a dodder, the dodder wouldn't be there.

The system of nature obviously requires someone like a dodder – that's its role, its function. That experience of being dodder is required. And so, I have to trust that my own experience – being Monica, exactly as I am in this moment – is also required by the system, by this natural network.

This also means that even the stories we tend to dismiss – those we feel are unnecessary – might actually be required. Maybe they serve to provoke a reaction, to push the system toward something different. Perhaps their role is to make others say, "No", this isn't the story we need; we need something else. But that something else can only emerge if we allow space for these stories to exist in the first place.

But there's something else. I don't think the most important story is one of hope. For me, the more powerful story is one of trust – trusting that I don't fully understand what's happening, and that it's okay not to know. It's okay that I don't completely grasp what dodder is really doing. Instead of latching onto the idea – dodder is a parasitic plant; it kills its host; it behaves in this way and no other – I can acknowledge that my understanding is incomplete. I can allow dodder to be dodder, and in doing so, I trust that there is more to its role than what I currently perceive.

If I allow myself to see dodder only within that closed framework, dodder will never be anything other than a parasite. But if I allow dodder to simply be dodder, and trust that it is what it is – acknowledging that my understanding is limited – then I also trust that there is more to it than what I currently perceive. By making space for that uncertainty, I allow dodder the potential to transform into something else – something I haven't yet imagined. For all we know, it could be essential to the sur-

vival of the planet. But if we insist on only seeing it through our existing framework, we'll never allow it to become anything beyond what we've already decided it is. And it cannot be transformed.

This ties back to what we discussed earlier – about allowing space for perspectives, ideas, and approaches that challenge our assumptions. I think this is less of a struggle in the arts, but in science – and in the history of science – we see time and time again that progress comes from those who refuse to accept limitations.

Take Marie Curie, for example. Before she discovered uranium, it “didn't exist” in human perception. Of course, it was always there, physically present, but we had no awareness of it. The only way she could uncover it was by trusting that there was *something more to know*, something unseen, something waiting to be revealed. That kind of trust – the willingness to allow for the unknown – is what makes discovery possible.

This is exactly why I find apocalyptic stories so unhelpful. They claim to tell the future, but what they really do is close the story. They assume an ending – that everything will collapse, that we are doomed – and in doing so, they eliminate the possibility for change. They are *closed* stories, already decided, leaving no room for transformation. And that's exactly why I don't find them useful. But any story that allows us to imagine another ending, that keeps things open – that's the kind of story I find more valuable. Because the truth is, there *is* no ending yet. The story isn't finished. It won't have an ending until it actually ends. So, until then, everything is open. Everything can shift; everything can become something else. And that, to me, is far more powerful.

GA: I really like how you're framing trust and hope – where hope implies striving

for something beyond, trust is about surrendering to what *is*. It makes me think of how ecosystems function: not in pursuit of an ideal state, but in a constant negotiation of relationships, dependencies, and transformations.

The artworks I enjoy the most remain open to endless interpretations regardless of what the artist want it to mean. Those are the works that continue to constantly unfold, reach, find, and search. Those are powerful artworks to me. And I can now see how a notion of trust might be central to that context of semantic openness too. I think that's another teaching we gain from the natural world. Even the cyclicity that we like to inscribe to natural life, it's very much fictional. It's not necessarily a cyclicity in itself, it's just part of certain kind of ease for us to theorize and monetize the cycles of nature for obvious reasons of sustenance. But there's something interesting about trust in the sense that it doesn't necessarily want you to go forward whereas hope inscribed this quasi-mystical idea that something will elevate and rescue us. Hope delegates agency. Do you think our fear of intrusion – of blurred boundaries – is what makes trust feel so difficult?

MG: The goal of trust seems to acknowledge an acceptance – there is this and there is that, and somehow, by existing together in this moment, they are already doing *something*. And that *something* remains open-ended. I think that's a beautiful framework.

You're making me think of the dodder and the rudbeckia again. As you said earlier, the dodder kind of melts into the rudbeckia. And of course, this is anthropomorphizing – but I don't mind that. What if, rather than being unsettled by the attacking dodder, the rudbeckia is actually trusting the process? Instead of

resisting, what if the plant is allowing this event to unfold precisely because it serves the whole? And by supporting the whole, it ultimately supports itself. The rudbeckia doesn't disappear – the rudbeckia returns, over and over. Clearly, the dodder isn't wiping it out entirely. So maybe this interaction isn't a tragedy at all.

I think part of the discomfort comes from our own ingrained fear of intrusion. We instinctively assume that the dodder breaching the boundaries of the rudbeckia is bad. But isn't that just a projection of our own anxieties about invasion – about the boundaries of our own bodies being violated?

And yet, intrusion is fundamental to life. How many bacteria and viruses are already inside us? And as we know, some of those bacteria are essential – we wouldn't even be the human beings we recognize without them. So how do we know that, given enough time – maybe a thousand million years – the dodder and the rudbeckia won't evolve into something entirely new? Maybe neither will exist in the form we see them today, but instead, a new being will emerge – something that is the direct fusion of both experiences.

After all, isn't that what happens with humans? Before bacteria and other symbiotic microorganisms became part of us, the *human* we know today simply didn't exist. There was no intrusion, but there was also no collaboration. What we think of as a boundary may, in the long run, turn out to be something else entirely.

GA: That's a fascinating tension – between seeing plants as completely diffused beings, shaped by their environment, and recognizing them as distinct individuals with their own character.

I think the challenge is to hold both truths at once: that plants (and by extension, everything) are entangled in external forces,

yet still have an essence that is *them*. Maybe the dodder complicates this even further because it actively dissolves boundaries. It forces us to ask: "What is identity when one being physically merges with another?"

And I totally get your hesitation about the overuse of diffraction as an academic trend. There's value in recognizing interconnectedness, but when we dissolve everything into an endless blur, we lose something real – the way an individual hibiscus leans toward the sun differently from another, the way each tree responds uniquely to wind and weather. Perhaps the real lesson is in balance: identity is not fixed, but it's also not meaningless. Maybe identity isn't about rigid boundaries but about patterns – the recurring ways in which a being expresses itself, even in the midst of flux.

So, the question then becomes: how do we tell stories that acknowledge both the entanglement and the irreplaceable individuality of things? How do we narrate identities in ways that don't smother them, yet don't become lost in total dissolution?

MG: Just briefly on personality – that term caused such a stir when it was first used in relation to fish, about twenty years ago when I was still working as a marine scientist. At the time, it was considered almost taboo – "Oh my god, you can't use that word!" – but then it became an actual field of study, because, of course, fish *do* have personalities.

And really, if you spend enough time with a plant, as you were saying, or with a dog or any other being, you start to recognize its individuality. You start noticing distinct aspects of its character. Certain traits emerge in one context but not in another, just as some qualities come out in response to particular people or environments. That alone tells us that there is *someone* in there – some kind of being

actively interacting with the world. But what I find even more relevant to our conversation is what you just said about diffract. Did you say – diffraction?

GA: Yes, diffraction.

MG: Okay, I haven't heard the term *diffraction* before, but yeah, that makes sense. I think it speaks to a larger issue in academia – this tendency toward polarization. It goes back to what we were discussing earlier about the artists and the way we separate and categorize things. We seem to keep swinging between extremes, whether it's saying, "Plants are just objects of study" or "No, they are subjects with their own agency". As long as we frame it in an either/or way, we remain locked in duality.

But the reality is, it's both. The skin, again, is a perfect example of this paradox. It is a boundary – it separates us from the external world – but at the same time, it is completely open, constantly interacting with and responding to the outside. So, yes, it represents duality, but it also dissolves it. And yet, in academia, we struggle to hold both truths at once. We want a clear answer: "Is it this or that?" But maybe we don't need to know definitively. Maybe we just need to trust that things carry on anyway, even in uncertainty.

And of course, now that you brought it up, dodder is everywhere in my mind! But thinking about it also reminded me of how mushrooms were perceived for a long time. They had such a bad wrap – seen as poisonous, dangerous, something to be avoided, feared. Only a few were edible, and even then, what we eat are actually the reproductive bodies. Which, if you think about it, means that when we eat mushrooms, we're basically eating someone's genitals.

GA: That's such a brilliant way to frame it – dodder as an early-stage version of what

fungi have already achieved. It really highlights how much our perception of organisms is relentlessly shaped by cultural narratives and the time in which we perceive them across the evolutionary spectrum.

Mushrooms, once seen as eerie or parasitic, have now become symbols of connection, resilience, and underground intelligence. But it wasn't so long ago that they were met with suspicion, much like dodder still is today. What if dodder, in some distant future, is understood not as a parasite but as a vital network-builder, a precursor to a new kind of ecological cooperation?

It makes me think about how we struggle with the endless transition and transformation of systems of relation. We judge them before they've more fully revealed their role in the bigger picture. Maybe what looks like destruction now is actually construction on another timescale, on an imperceptible plateau that stretches into the future – one we're just not tuned into yet.



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