

Liz Solo + Jesse Walker

The Phytophilous Initiative

Science and art, on rare occasions, are known to dance together. Often their affinity goes unrecognized, but in the words of Einstein: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand." There is a relationship of expansion and contraction, where creative thought opens a territory, and rigorous experiment reveals forms and patterns within that territory. Reason gives us constants and imagination gives us novelty. Sometimes, in extraordinary circumstances, an artful science, or a scientific art, will surface. These events are often fragile and too swiftly rejected by peers, being the result of minds and efforts that have pushed themselves into a fertile but isolated "fringe space" in order to investigate questions that have a real and lasting capacity to transform us. In the spirit of artsience, then, *The Phytophilous Initiative* asks: Do plants have emotions? Can this be measured? How can we know? Liz and Jesse are neither the first to wonder this, nor test for it. Cleve Baxter, an American polygraph expert, opened a watershed when he decided to text a lie-detector on a houseplant. In multiple, controlled experiments, he showed that plants would register reactions to the unstated intentions of persons around it, were upset by the termination of living beings, and would even respond to a "surprise party" happening for their caretaker in another city!

The pressing question, when communicating with plants from a scientific perspective, is that of repeatability: is it possible to induce a plant to register an emotional response on a polygraph in such a way that anyone performing the experiment will get the same results? The answer that Baxter gave us was *yes*, but with a condition: standard, quantifiable results are only seen when adequate measures are taken to "isolate" the factor of consciousness itself. Consciousness is such a sensitive subject that truly isolating it, establishing "laboratory conditions" with regards to it, is elusive. As a consequence of this sensitivity, and perhaps for other reasons, Baxter's research was shelved by mainstream science. To be sure, it has survived, but no longer with the prestige that was initially expected. Plant communication is relegated to the domain of quacks and mavericks. Nevertheless, this opens us to another possibility *vis-a-vis* the field of bio-communication, in which we enter the domain of the artist. Here, the sharp cuts of certainty can be softened by questions *raised though the very act of performance itself*. With art, mystery is not a flaw in design, but rather a consequence of *success*. Thus, for the duration of *The Phytophilous Initiative* the gallery becomes laboratory and the laboratory becomes gallery. Discoveries can be made and repeatability tested, and yet even without forwarding a scientific claim to a jury of experts, there is a definitive knowledge-seeking experience which may or may not lead the viewer to conclude, with Baxter, that plants have an emotional life.

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