

How to grow livable worlds: Ten not-so-easy steps

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An Induction

What follows are excerpts from a project I am calling Rooting into the Planthroposcene. Taking the impossible and utterly comedic form of a step by step guide to getting out of the Anthropocene, this project picks up recent calls for inventive forms of speculative fabulation. Just to prepare you for what will follow. This is not so much a research talk, as an incantation. We have to remember that we are living under a spell, and this spell making it impossible for us grow livable worlds. It's time to cast another spell, to call other worlds into being, to conjure other worlds within this world. It is clear that we are at the limits of language, at the edges of imagination. We need art, experiment, and radical disruption to learn other ways to see, feel, and know. This form does well to channel both my rage about our current predicament, and my playful and loving, if also serious aspirations for dreaming worlds otherwise. Consider this as an invitation to experiment with ways of dreaming differently.

Step 1: Never forget this: "We" are not "one".

Say it again. And again. We cannot forget to keep asking: precisely who is hailed by this Anthropos, that figure positioned at the helm of the Anthropocene? Anthropocenic rhetoric calls out "Man" as the agent of his own demise, and also simultaneously vaults him into position as the only viable savior of the planet. It is time to stop telling ourselves that if we got ourselves into this mess, we alone can get us out. Even as Anthropocene thinking attempts to call our attention to and finally hold us responsible for the egregious effects of our actions, it still figures humans as a singular figure, transcendent over, and separate from some Edenic nature in peril. These narratives re-center rather than decenter Man as the agent with natural dominion over this planet's future.

Do not get distracted by the misplaced concreteness of scientific efforts to articulate the physical markers and temporal boundaries of a geological era made by humans. What we are witnessing is the apotheosis of five hundred years of colonial violence, extractive capitalism, white supremacy, and the hubris of human exceptionalism. The Capitalocene and the Plantationocene, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing's concepts, are apt monikers to identify the forces that have long been active at work terraforming the planet. These destructive forces are propelled, not by all people, but by those particularly egregious ways of doing life modeled on self-aggrandizing Man.

Remember this: not all are hailed by this figure or form of life. Capitalism and colonialism are not to be mistaken as natural or innate to human existence. They are not inevitable consequences of human evolution or civilization. But they are the condition of our current predicament. Anthropocene worlds are built on slavery and dispossession. Marisol de la Cadena calls our attention to those Anthropos-not-seen,

those whose lives and lands continue to be spent in the accumulation of wealth by colonial and neocolonial powers. These are the people who remain targets of dispossession and attempted annihilation today, even, and especially as, capitalism gets into high gear in its efforts to “go green” and “save the world.” Don’t believe the hype of sustainability rhetoric. The worlds built by colonialism and capitalism are unlivable for us all.

Step 2: Break this world to make other worlds possible.

There is no way to “mitigate” Anthropocenic violence using Anthropocene logics. Refuse calls to design for the Anthropocene. Such designs are precisely the technological fixes that will keep us locked into the same rhythms of extraction and dispossession. Refuse to be lured into those climate change edutainment complexes, those gleaming glass, metal, and concrete infrastructures whose capital- and labour- intensive designs exquisitely expose the ruse of sustainability as an aesthetic maneuver grounded in Edenic visions of nature. This is not the kind of green that will save us.

Yes, there are apocalypses already ongoing all around us. The decimation of the Boreal forest to extract bitumen on stolen Native land in Canada is one such apocalypse. But giving into apocalyptic thinking is itself a kind of exit strategy, an easy out. Ruin porn, including those all-too compelling images of plants rupturing through abandoned buildings in Detroit and Chernobyl, thrives on this narrative of “a world without us.” We are told over and over again, that the world will be better off without people. Beware of such apocalyptic thinking. Anthropocenic thought catches us all up in thrall of apocalypse, and sets us to work, furtively dreaming the end of times. We must refuse what Donna Haraway calls the “tragic detumescence” of a narrative arc that is bent on pulling the entire planet toward unstoppable catastrophe. Do not be swayed into thinking that this is how it has to go down, as if apocalypse is precisely what will have been. What futures are we setting in motion with all our apocalyptic rhetoric?

Resist the lure of apocalypse like your life depends on it. Yes, it’s easier to dream the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but the only way to thwart the momentum of the Anthropocene is to break the spell of capitalism and activate processes of decolonization. And while it is clearly time to dismantle Anthropocene thinking, there is no need to wait until the end of this world to begin to conjure livable ones. There are as yet, as Stuart McLean reminds us, other worlds in this world. And there are, as yet, worlds to come. But which worlds will be livable? And what makes a livable world?

Step 3: Repeat this mantra: We are not alone. We are not alone. We are not alone.

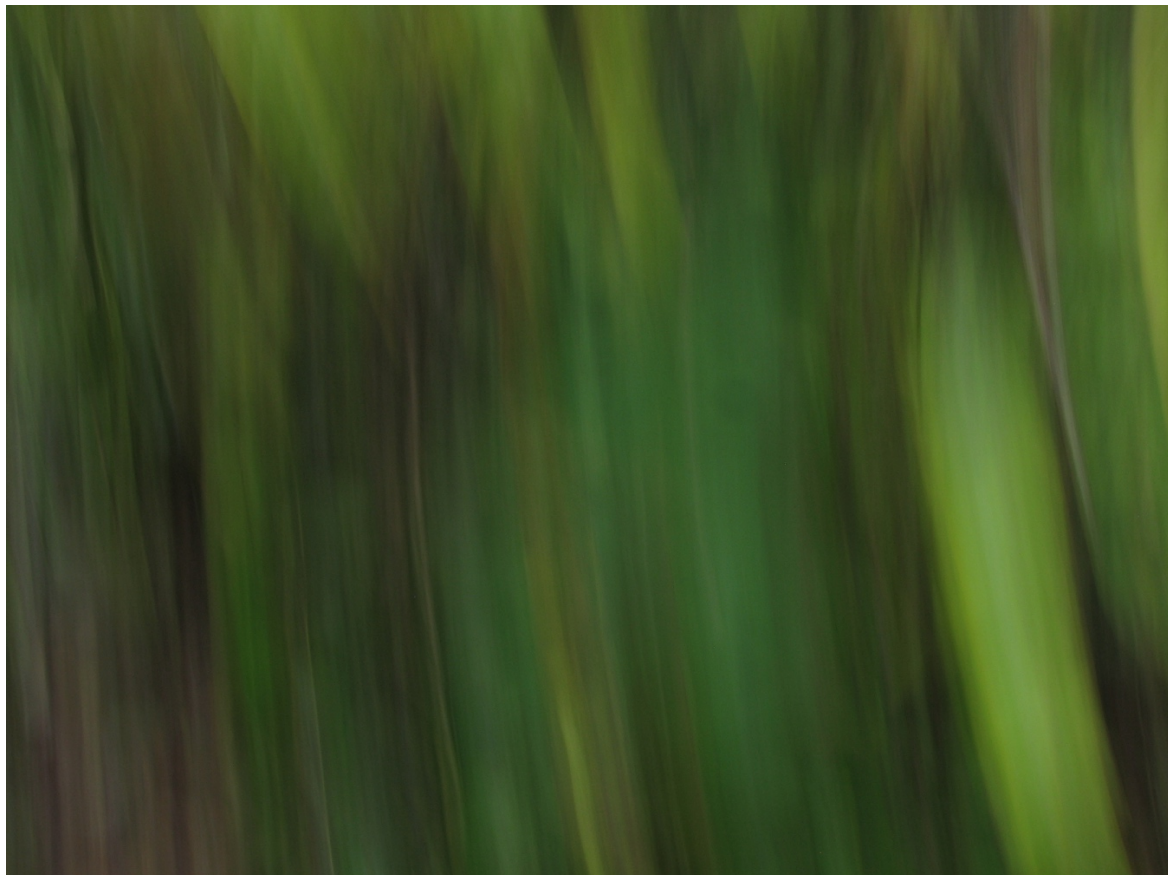
Looking back at the past five hundred years of efforts to assert Western Man’s independence from, and power over nature, it is clear that we should never be trusted to act alone. Anthropocene thinking is so obsessed with Man’s independence, with unilateral action, and autonomy, that it forgets that there are other forces and powers among us, including those with significantly better skills in the realm of world-making and planetary-scale change. In some cases, these beings have billions of years more experience than us in terraforming livable worlds.

Step 4: Name our most powerful ally.

Who made this this planet livable and breathable for animals like us? Say it out loud: The photosynthetic ones. Photosynthetic organisms form a biogeochemical force of a magnitude we have not yet properly grasped. Over two billion years ago, photosynthetic microbes spurred the event known today as the oxygen catastrophe, or the great oxidation. These creatures dramatically altered the composition of the atmosphere, choking out the ancient anaerobic ones with poisonous oxygen vapors. If we were to

continue to fall into the trap of naming linear time-bound eras after singular agents, we might be rattled to think that we are living in the wake of what should have been called the Phytocene.

Photosynthesizers, like cyanobacteria, algae, terrestrial plants and trees are the planets most powerful agents of elemental rearrangement. The science of photosynthesis, with its calculative metrics bent on extracting value from green beings, is too mired in the logic of naturalized capital. These green beings must be understood otherwise; that is, as practitioners of a kind of alchemical, cosmic mattering. We think plants can't move, but they reach out across the cosmos, drawing the energy of the sun into their tissues so that they can work their terrestrial magic. Pulling matter out of thin air, plants must be understood as world-making conjurers. Their elemental rearrangements teach us the most nuanced lessons about matter and mattering. More powerful than any industrial plant, communities of photosynthetic creatures rearrange the elements on a planetary scale. They know how to compose livable, breathable, and nourishing worlds. As they exhale, they compose the atmosphere; as they decompose, they matter the compost and feed the soil. Holding the earth down and the sky up, they sing in nearly-audible ultrasonic frequencies as they transpire, moving massive volumes of water from the depths of the earth up to the highest clouds. And for those still caught up in the thrall of an economy that fetishizes carbon, perhaps the most important art these creatures practice is sucking up, with gusto, the gaseous carbon emissions we humans generate so abundantly.



Green Beings, Kinesthetic Image, Natasha Myers 2017

To say that forests and marine microbes form the “lungs of the earth” is an understatement. They literally breathe us into being. All cultures turn around plants’ metabolic rhythms. Plants are the substance, substrate, scaffolding, symbol, sign and sustenance of political economies the world over. We must learn how to work with and for plants so that we can be nourished and clothed and sheltered and pleased and healed, without destroying the earth. The plants are the world-makers we need to heed if we hope to grow livable worlds. And our worlds will only be livable worlds when people learn how to conspire with the plants.

Step 5: Foment plant/people conspiracies to root into the Planthroposcene

Repeat this again and again: We are of the plants. Now, if this is true, then the figure that should ground our actions is not the self-aggrandizing Anthropos, so much as a strangely hybrid figure we could call Planthropos. And now try wrapping your mouth around this word until it rolls off your tongue with ease: Planthroposcene. The Planthroposcene names an aspirational episteme, not a time-bound era, one that invites us to stage new scenes and new ways to see and seed plant/people relations in the here and now, not some distant future. And it is grounded in the wisdom of the ancient and ongoing radical solidarity projects that plants have already cultivated with their many people.

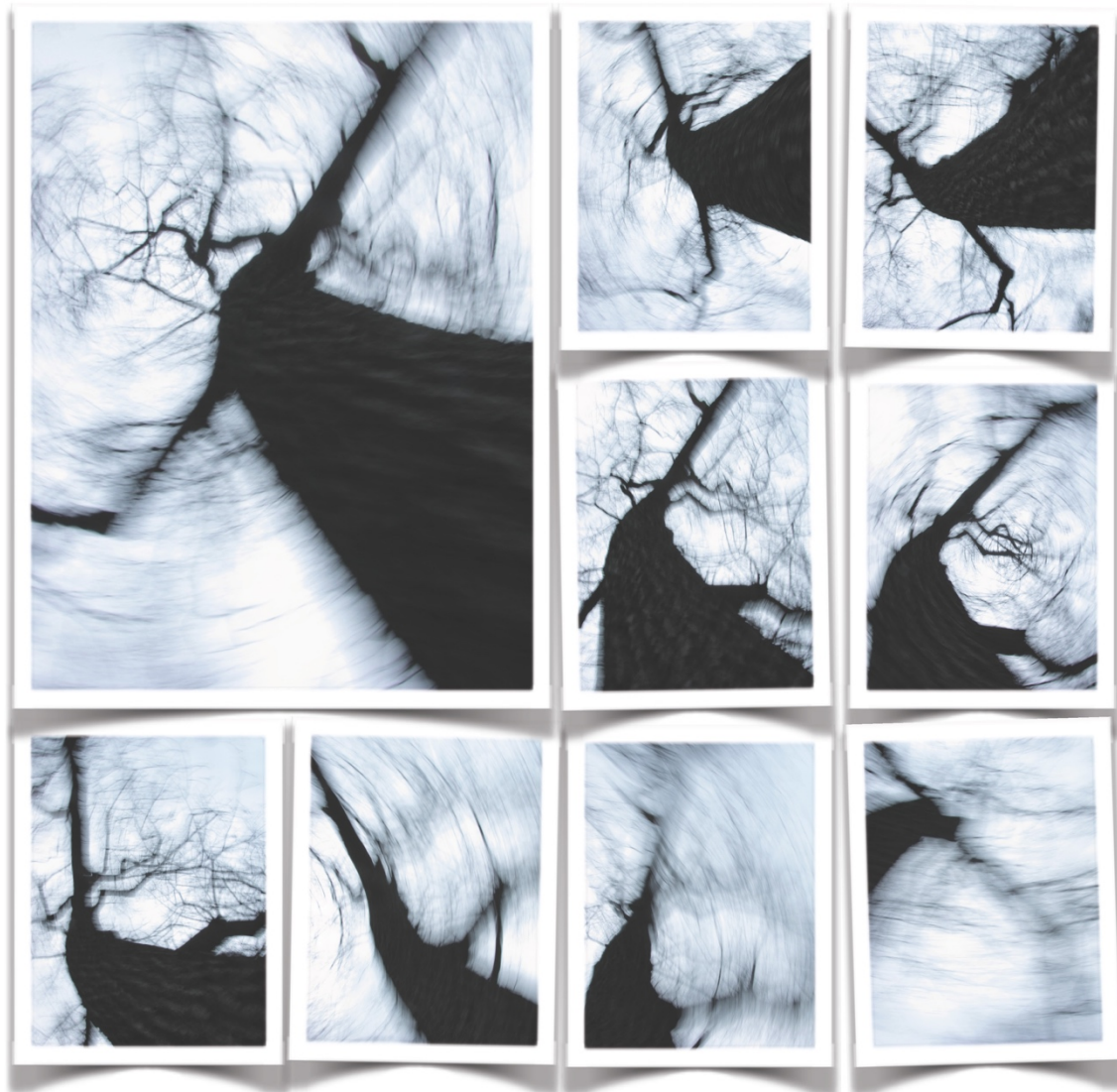
Rather than circumscribing the terrors we face now, the Planthroposcene is an invitation to root ourselves into a way of doing life that would break the frame of Anthropocene logics. The Planthroposcene acknowledges the joint and uncertain futures of plants and peoples and demands we change the terms of encounter so that we can become allies to these green beings. Anthropologist Tim Choy makes a powerful call to think conspiracy otherwise, not as a sinister association, but as the grounds for an aspirational politics where people learn how to con-spire, that is to breathe together in order to fight against the atmospheric effects of industrial exuberance. It’s time to extend his call to unite people in a conspiracy of breathers to include the plants. That is, we need to learn not just how to collaborate, but also how to conspire with the plants, to breathe with them. Remember, they breathed us into being.

Remember this: what is good for plants is good for everyone else. Get on their side. Consider yourself at their service. Get to know plants intimately and on their terms. And be sure to tap into their desires for forms of life that are not for us. Support their efforts to keep the earth cool and the waters cleansed. Give plants, and as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa teaches us, the soils, space and time to flourish outside of the rhythms of capitalist extraction and the chemical violence of industrial agriculture. Remember: Plants need their pollinators. They need their fungal relations. They need their animal allies.

Above all, they need us to radically reconfigure how we stage our relations with them. Indeed, if plants are sun worshipers, perhaps we ought to be plant worshipers. A little reverence for the plants could go a long way. Invent rituals. Practice permaculture with the witches. Start a local church for plant worship. Don’t worry: reverence for plants doesn’t mean you can’t eat them. But it does mean it would be polite to thank them for their generosity. Just think: If you had to consult the plants to ask permission to use them, industrial agriculture, strip mining, clear cutting, and the expanding concrete of urban sprawl would be inconceivable. Just ask, they will tell you.

Step 6: Disrupt colonial common sense

Decolonization means giving stolen lands back to Indigenous peoples. And decolonization demands we reckon with and dismantle the overt and covert ways that settler states are structured on white supremacy, slavery, and the erasures of existing Land/body relations through fantasies of Terra Nullius.



Dances with Trees, Kinesthetic Images by Natasha Myers, 2017

Perhaps a first step towards decolonization would require that we detune our all-too colonial imaginations. To do this, we would need to upend everything we believed is common sense.

Does talking to plants sound crazy to you? Consider this: for millennia, and still to this day, people all over the world cultivate deep relationships with plants. Many have come to know intimately plants' powers and predilections, especially those whose lives and livelihoods get them tangled up with the plants and caught in their spiraling whorl. There are gardeners, farmers, hunters, healers, herbalists, cooks, artists, naturalists, foresters, scientists and shaman all over the world consider plants as sentient beings worthy of address. Lots of people hear plants sing, though not necessarily in the audible registers you might anticipate.

And at the same time, many people, perhaps even you, would think this is absurd. Sure you read that story about plants in your Facebook feed: "Science has confirmed that plant roots have a kind of swarm intelligence..." But we don't need the disenchanting sciences of plant sensing to tell us what plant people

have long known. What we do need to do is make strange the disenchantment and skepticism we have inherited from those whose power was secured in part through sciences designed to invalidate all other ways of knowing the world. It was the colonizers, of course, who refused to believe local and Indigenous people's claims that the plants can sing.



Magic Forest, Kinesthetic Image by Natasha Myers, 2018

It's time to forget everything you thought you knew about the living world, especially what you believe is perceptible, imaginable, reasonable, legible, and meaningful. While you are doing that important work, don't forget that human exceptionalism is another colonial formation, one that violently evacuates the liveliness and sentience of the more-than-human world around us. Refuse the disenchantments of a mechanistic science that would render more-than-human worlds in the form of alienable bits of life and death ready to be portioned off as property, resource, or commodity. Sideline colonial and capitalist moral economies that dictate what is good, valuable, and true; especially those that naturalize economic growth and extraction as the work that is proper to Man.

Refuse to discipline or deride the animisms of local and Indigenous cosmologies. Push back on every contortion or erasure or reduction that seeks to make local and Indigenous practices legible or commensurable or rational to science. Do not appropriate others' knowledges but do the work to make yourself receptive and responsive so that you can take these knowledges seriously. Make room. Make space for other ways of knowing and storying the living world. Remember: there are people all over the world who have the protocols, the knowhow, and the responsibility to consult the plants. Livable worlds need people who know how to talk to the plants.

Step 7: Vegetalize your sensorium

Once you have set in motion efforts to decolonize your common sense, it is time to vegetalize your sensorium so that you too can learn with and alongside the plants. As a co-conspirator supporting their world-making projects, you will need to apprentice with them. What do plants want? What do plants know? What can a plant do? We do not yet know. But you could reach toward them with the openness of not knowing, and forgetting what you thought counts as knowledge.

Consider this: your sensorium, especially your senses of colour, texture, taste, touch, and smell are already articulated by plant life. Their forms inspire your aesthetics, entrain your habitus, and excite your imagination. From this perspective, it is clear that your senses are already vegetalized. And yet there is still much work to do to learn how to extend your synesthetic sensorium to meet their lively worlds.

In order to awaken the latent plant in you, you will need to get interested in the things that plants care about. Make space for plants to take root, and take the time watch them grow. Linger among them and let their sentiences and sensibilities alter your perceptions, how you think, and how and what you know. Though plants don't have eyes, ears, noses, or mouths, don't be fooled: they can see, hear, smell, taste and feel. Let their planty sensitivities inflect your own. Tune into the different ways they do time, learn to follow their tempos and rhythms. Pay attention to the ways they defy all-too-human notions of individuality, bodily integrity, subjectivity, and agency. Let the plants redefine what you mean by the terms sensing, sensitivity, and sentience. Let yourself be lured by their tropic turns and you will soon acquire freshly vegetalized sensory dexterities.

You can activate the latent plant in you through incantations, hypnosis, meditation or yoga. Try this Kriya for Cultivating Your Inner Plant (<http://imaginativeethnography.org/imaginings/affect/sensing-botanical-sensoria/>) Vegetalization is possible because your body does not end at the skin. Your contours are not constrained by physical appearance. Your morphological imaginary is fluid and changeable. Indeed, your tissues can absorb all kinds of fantasies. Your imagination generates more than mere mental images; its reach extends through your entire sensorium. Simultaneously visual and kinesthetic, imaginings carry an affective charge. They can excite your muscles, tissues, and fascia, heighten or alter your senses. You can fold semiosis into sensation. Perceptual experiments can rearticulate your sensorium. And by imagining otherwise, and telling different stories, you can open up new sensible worlds.

Step 8: Take ecology off the grid

Once you have detuned your colonial imagination and vegetalized your sensorium the world will look and feel a lot different. You may begin to sense things you have never perceived before. You may get the feeling that you are being watched everywhere you go. Indeed, the plants and trees are not indifferent to you: they are paying very close attention to all the beings that ingather around them. They know how to lure you and their other co-conspirators with force. Start with the plants, follow their inquisitive growth, their running roots and rhizomes, the widespread movements of their pollen and seeds, and an entire ecology of beings and becomings and comings undone will soon become perceptible. Get caught up in the involutory momentum that propels these beings to get entangled in one another's lives and you will soon start to perceive affective ecologies taking shape among the thicket of relations all around you. Cultivate modes of attention that can pay attention to what matters to the plants and their co-conspirators. Becoming sensor, tune into this ecology of practices and practitioners. Follow the push and pull, the attractions and repulsions, the happenings taking shape in and around the plants. Get a feel for

the ways that plants practice their arts at the cusp of life and death. With time you will begin to detune your colonial ecological sensorium and new worlds will open up into view.

Develop protocols for an ungrid-able ecology, a mode of inquiry that refuses the colonialism, militarism, heteronormativity and economizations of life that ground conventional ecology. Resist desires for legibility and statistical generalizability. Refuse attempts to calculate an ecology's energetic efficiencies or apply cost-benefit analyses. Invalidate metrics that would parse ecological relations into mechanical parts. Break all automatic, prefabricated sensors.



Goldenrod's vibratory milieu, Kinesthetic Image by Natasha Myers, 2018

Over time you will begin to forget what you used to think "nature" was; you will forget how you used to think life "worked"; and eventually you will forget, too, the naturalizing tropes that made you believe that living beings "work" like machines, or that forests perform "ecosystems services," or that "reproduction" and "fitness" were the only valuable and recordable measures of a life. Confront the colonial and capitalist desires of the ecological sciences. Say no to conventional ecology's exacting metrics that justify an extractive ecology indebted to expansion and dispossession. Beware of Anthropocene ecologies that reduce land care practices to resource management. Do ecology otherwise.

Step 9: Garden against Eden

Forget everything you thought a garden was. And everything you thought a gardener was supposed to do. Your job in the Planthropocene is to stage plant/people conspiracies to keep this planet livable and breathable. Your primary commitment will be to support plant growth. Everywhere. Start by letting the plants grow where they want to: let them break through the concrete; root into every fissure and surface;

grow through the holes in every fence. Don't be afraid of the plants. Remember, those plants we vilify as invasive species are here to teach us about the ravages of colonialism. The plants themselves are not evil. They grow where lands have been destroyed. They grow on sites of dispossession. They grow where lands and bodies are out of relation. Before we poison the earth with glyphosate we need to ask ourselves what the plants are doing here.

The Planthroposcene uproots the infrastructures of our Anthropocenic cities founded on Edenic desires of a nature tamed and contained by Man. Give those old-order infrastructures back to the plants and the fungi; let them decompose. Wild urban plant growth certainly does portend the decline of Empire, but in the Planthroposcene wild growth will not be read a sign of ruin. Planthroposcenic cities will be designed to support plant life everywhere. Each surface will offer an affordance, a place for plants to root and grow and decompose. Perhaps one day you will conspire with the plants to grow your own home. Perhaps cities will grow themselves into cooling forests, brimming with nourishment. In the Planthroposcene, radical farmers like those at the Land Institute in Kansas will have succeeded in dismantling industrial agriculture by conspiring with the plants to bring back the plains, growing perennial grains in the form of regenerating grasslands. These lands will demand the return of the buffalo, they will resist erosion, retain water, activate soil microbes, and reject heavy machinery and chemical fertilizers. In the Planthroposcene, the capitalist imperative to grow economies will be subverted and supplanted by the imperative to give plants time and space they need to grow, to freely articulate relations with their allies, and express their fullest desires. Humans will have to cede their biopolitical powers over lands and bodies. We will no longer be in control.

Step 10: Make art for the Planthroposcene

Refuse the aesthetics of ruin porn, which constrains our imaginaries about plants expressing their powers to sites of cultural decay and times of human extinction. Cultivate, instead, a taste for Planthroposcene porn: art that keeps people in the game by staging intimate relations among plants and people. Follow Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens to make art that figures "nature as lover, not mother"; art that lures us into the realm of more-than-human pleasures. Get down and dirty and learn to curate your own EcoSexual Bathhouse. Even Darwin knew that plants could feel the buzz and hum of insect wings, and the pleasures of touch. Join Špela Petrič and the Plant Sex Consultancy to design vibrators for lonely plants and flowers that have lost their pollinators. Activate your own capacity for cosmic mattering by learning Chimera Rosa's protocols to tattoo your skin with chlorophyll. You too can learn how to photosynthesize. Apprentice with Mexican artist Gilberto Esparza to design lively nomadic plant companions. Build the bodies of your planimal-machines from electronic waste harvested from the ruins of capitalism, and engineer them to draw their energy from bacterial life, so that when they suck up raw sewage downstream from toxic industrial flows, they can transform it into water that supports plants and their allies. Join artists from Dance for Plants to create performances for the potted plants that are slow dancing on the window ledges of your apartment.

Whatever you do, conspire to make art like your life depends on disrupting with dissensus the colonial common sense that would leave us all to die in the Anthropocene.