

Philodendron Erubescens: Lament of an Office Plant & Manus Hominis: Lament of the Gloved Hand

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Philodendron Erubescens: Lament of an Office Plant

This piece attends to what is deprived of a voice, what dies silently without even the possibility of screaming. In an office deserted by humans during the coronavirus, a forgotten plant tells its life story. A minor phenomenology shapes its testimony. Beginning with a phenomenological reduction to drive consciousness back to things as they phenomenologize themselves. Then an excessive reduction of this consciousness that recounts itself using "I", the reduced consciousness a plant has of its surrounding environment, ours, itself reduced to suspicion and austerity.

I am thirsty and I am dying. I am dying of thirst. I was near the window when they left. But when they left it was still winter. Now it is spring, a spring with the torrid air of Summer. The sun burns my waxy leaves, the soil is dry, I agonize. And nothing, two months and not a sound. Not a sound to announce that my soil will be inundated.

Not a drop. Because in this place, it does not rain on my leaves, it does not mist on my aerial roots. The air remains hopelessly dry.

Nothing comparable to the place where I was born. I was engendered by a small foraging wasp. I was born of the abrupt passage of a being endowed with movement who detached me from the spathe I hung from and who, following a fifteen meter fall, pushed me into soft and humid soil. With the scream of erupting life I pierced the envelope that protected me and, with the carelessness of exploring life, I broke through to the surface. With the impatience of a life affirming itself, I grasped at the first tree trunk available to me and drove toward the light. Then, with the endurance of a life settling, I sunk roots into the penumbra of earth and interlacing rhizomes. Others departed from each new knot to gather the trunk in a tight and firm embrace and drink running droplets after a faraway crackling came from the crowns. With the suffering of struggling life, I unfolded my vine, out toward the sky, among those of others, in a race where leading means risking being covered, or overcome, but also covering and overcoming. One had to stay in the race to avoid suffocation, one had to stay in the race despite parasitic larvae and insects. Each new leaf was the promise of captured light, each new leaf was the privileged prey of a waiting predator. With the exuberance of flourishing life, I finally opened bracts, grew large red-pink spadices, and introduced my own spathes to the insects that would pollinate them.

Suddenly, a sharp-edged object cut me off the ground, broke my embraces, separated me from my inflorescences. What became of them? Did they know to launch roots toward the ground? Did they have the strength to produce seeds? I know nothing of them because I now live in a pot.

It was difficult at first. Barely launched, the roots' meristem reached the limits of the underground world, in all directions, the world had closed upon itself, roots could only coil around themselves, encountering more roots than soil. Gone was the generosity of the large trunk. Mine was held back, no, authoritatively attached, to a thin stake impossible to embrace. And as soon as my vine reached its highest part, I

could only fall back down before reaching a sunless sky without. The sun had moved to the side. Strangely, the more it shone the more glacial and intermittent air fell upon me, the more it disappeared the more dry heat rose from the ground. Sure, the potting soil was rich and I produced flowers without exhausting myself. But they withered without visitation from a single insect. I had been condemned to sterility.

In return, no larva devoured my insides, no plant sucked my sap, no competitor suffocated me. I was the only plant. Locked inside a small circular world I had acceded to individuality. The beings endowed with movement who previously attached themselves to my vine at the risk of breaking it now treated me carefully. The light-footed one who spent its days near the light misted and delicately dusted my leaves. The heavy-footed one posted on the shadowy side always came back with water it used to inundate my small chunk of soil. Several times a day, other steps came near, other voices gathered around me. I was the princess of the place. If I suffered, it was from an excess of tenderness inundating my bit of soil already gorged with water. Didn't they know that when the days are short, I barely need any? And why did they plunge me into it before leaving for the summer months? Didn't they know it suffocated me?

What did they become? They no longer come. My world is dry and I am thirsty. My leaves wither, my roots are nothing but dried wood. And not a single sound in two months. It is true, now that I think of it, that things had already begun to change a while ago. The rattling of fingers had succeeded the vibrations of voices. Some days, not a single vibration, but rattles that came from the side of light to which those coming from the dark side responded. Their care for me was redoubled, as if caressing my leaves healed them from the tactile violence of keyboards. All on my own, I was the gift calling for freedom, I was the nostalgia for a garden, the dream of an elsewhere. This did not stop until the day the vibrations suddenly disappeared, the rattles stopped, and my soil began to desiccate.

My soil is dry, silence prevails, and I sit under the light burned by sunrays. How could they abandon me so without ever thinking about me? Did a catastrophe take place? Nothing caught fire, I would have been the first victim. Sometimes I hear the rain, right next to me, but my soil remains dry and no one thinks of me. Yet, I was the tenderness of this place.

Wait, a sound. Steps! I do not know them. They circle the limited space that surrounds me. What is happening? What am I feeling? Finally, water drops! No, a substance that gnaws my leaves' cuticle, the air is filled with it, it penetrates my stomata. Help! The steps fade away, the substance spreads. Once again, steps. I know them! They are the light steps of the being endowed with movement who finds its place near the window again. I would like to tell it how much I missed it. The vibrations of its voice reach me. But they have changed. The voice speaks alone, yet does not speak to itself, a voice which is elsewhere even if it comes from here. I feel the rattling of the keyboard. Why doesn't it give me any water? Why doesn't it come to caress my leaves? Doesn't it see the dust that covers me? I must look awful, but that should awaken its compassion. Oh, it gets up. It approaches me! Finally, I feel its fingers, but they are not its fingers, they are shaped like it but do not feel like it. Why is it tearing me away from my place? It knows that a plant does not move. There it is dropping me! Doesn't it know that a plant does not hold on? What am I doing in this closed off world? I have no more air, nor more light to breathe. The world has become so small, the world has become so dry, so dark, without air. For me, it's over. One last thought: does my forest still exist?

Manus Hominis: Lament of the Gloved Hand

To think the sense of touch, philosophers have often privileged the hand. To them, this organ seemingly concentrates within itself the nobility of the human species in its difference with other living beings who do not have hands at their disposal. Being properly human, Martin Heidegger would even associate it with thought: "Perhaps thinking, too, is just something like building a cabinet. At any

rate, it is a craft, a 'handicraft' [Es ist jedenfalls ein Hand-Werk].” Thus, the hand is not simply a prehensile organ. It “is not an organic part of the body intended to grasp , take hold, or indeed scratch [griffer], and let us add grasp [prendre], comprehend, conceive, if one moves from Greif to begreifen and to Begriff,” it reveals instead “the essence of man,” writes Derrida reading Heidegger. But what becomes of the hand in the time of the coronavirus? In this piece, Guillaume de Vaultx and Nibras Chehayed lend their voice to this organ so that it might testify.

Flat as a foot, this is how I was before he rose up. In fact, I remained flat for a while longer, though he was up on his feet, a mere shock absorber against falls, no longer subjected to the locomotion of the body, but still in the service of the face that must not meet the ground, in the service of the head that might be wounded. Then, his feet anchored themselves to the ground, then he secured his balance, and I acceded to independence. I turned away from the ground toward the sky, my thumb entered into dialogue with the other fingers, I oriented myself toward things, I reached for them, touched them, grasped them, I felt the reality of a world offering itself by feel, a vastness to be explored.

I made man the master of things. I was the pride of this being I made proud. He humiliated others by flaunting me, and others bowed their heads. Ashamed of being de-handed, they submitted to him and my manipulations. He enjoyed possessing me and thrust me toward his fellow human beings who thrust their own in return: our handshakes sealed the pact of superior beings. One can thus imagine the tragedy my eventual loss represented. My disappearance, no one could grieve, because of her the world once again eluded the grasp. I then haunted him for the rest of his existence. I haunted him the way a ghost haunts.

I fabricated all kinds of tools. I made tools of tools that freed me once more. My skin softened, acquiring sensibility. I redeployed then to explore bodies, to caress what caressed me.

But now I am being locked inside gloves like feet are in socks. From one day to the next, I was deposed. Touching my fellow human beings is forbidden, touching what also touches me as soon as I touch it.

How will man still have a world, without my touch to link what he sees and what he feels, what he tastes and enjoys? How can man still believe in the existence of the world without my touch to appease his doubts and tell him: yes, this is.

Condemned to insensitivity, I am assigned to the mechanical tapping of keyboards, to the touch of screens, receivers of stolen tactility. I tap and touch at breakneck speed, impatiently waiting to be returned to my destiny, to not have any. I tap and touch at breakneck speed, distracted by the fate that hovers above me, temporarily condemned to perform tasks for which the tone of the voice and the movement of the iris will soon suffice. I live with the anticipating sadness of the one who will not be wanted tomorrow and, if dying, will not be missed. Because these beings are not haunted by ghosts.