Botanical Speculations

Botanical Speculations:

Plants in Contemporary Art

Edited by

Giovanni Aloi

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OPENING REMARKS

TIFFANY HOLMES AND GIOVANNI ALOI

Tiffany Holmes: My name is Tiffany Holmes. I'm the Dean of Undergraduate Studies here at SAIC and it's my great pleasure to welcome you here today to our symposium called *Botanical Speculations*. This event is co-hosted by 'Conversations on Art and Science' and The Art History, Theory and Criticism Department.

Under the leadership of SAIC, now chancellor, Walter Massey, the Conversations on Art and Science Event Series was launched in 2011 as a forum for exploring interdisciplinary and critical perspectives on Art Science design and technology.

Lectures or panel discussions hosted every fall and spring terms bring noted artists, designers, and scholars to the SAIC campus to discuss their work. These dialogues provide a time and a place for considering myriad perspectives on art science design, nature, and technology. They also sustain the diverse conversations that are ongoing in the work of faculty and students here at SAIC.

I would like, especially at this moment, to deliver a special thanks to Giovanni Aloi, the conceptual mastermind behind today's event, Andy Yang, our Art and Science Faculty Coordinator and Elizabeth Anderson, our Program Coordinator for the *Visiting Artist Program*.

Welcome to all of our plant-loving audience members, thank you for supporting *Conversations on Art and Science*. Next, I'm going to hand over things and also introduce my wonderful colleague, Giovanni Aloi. He is a faculty member in the Art History, Theory and Criticism department who studied History of Art and Art Practice in Milan and moved to London in 1997 to research at Goldsmiths University, where he obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in Art History, a Master in Visual Cultures, and a Ph.D. on the subject of natural history in contemporary art.

He has curated art projects involving photography and the moving image and is a BBC radio contributor as well as the co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press new series *Art after Nature*. Giovanni's first book, titled *Art & Animals* was published in 2011, and since 2006 he

has been the editor in chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature and Visual Culture*.

So, with that, I'm going to hand things over to Giovanni, but please join me again in thanking him for putting this two-day event together.

Giovanni Aloi: I would like to thank Tiffany Holmes for supporting this event. SAIC is a fantastic institution in which innovative research and multidisciplinary creativity can thrive. Where else would have we been able to host an event on plants in contemporary art on this scale? I am particularly grateful to all my colleagues and students who will contribute to the program today and whose interest in plants is a constant source of inspiration for my own work.

BOTANICAL SPECULATIONS

Botanical Speculations explores how contemporary art and science help one another reconsider the world of plants. In this book, researchers, artists, art historians, and activists collaboratively map the uncharted territories of new forms of botanical knowledge.

PAINTING PLANTS: OBJECTIFICATION AND SYMBOLISM

GIOVANNI ALOI

On the day preceding *Botanical Speculations*, Giovanni Aloi led a tour of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection to focus on the representation of plants in classical, modern, and contemporary art. While it is not possible to reproduce the breadth and wealth of the tour, much of which revolved around student discussion, the examples and extracts that follow map the intricacies of symbolism and objectification that have characterized the history of plant representation in art. The discussions that formed the core of *Botanical Speculations* challenged past representational tropes to envision new ethical and aesthetic dimensions in which human-plant encounters could be staged.

Correggio
Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist
1515 – oil on panel

This type of Renaissance painting provides a good opportunity to understand how symbolism and objectification have intertwined in the production of representation that reduces plants to vehicles of human affairs. During the Italian Renaissance, a substantial shift in the representation of the natural world took place. This was partly caused by the revival of classical philosophy and science which pervaded the West. Beforehand, during the Middle Ages, realism ceased to be the privileged style in which to represent the world. During the second century, the *Physiologus* gathered pagan tales of animal stories infused with Christian morals and became the most adopted reference of iconographical sourcing in art. Its impact upon the epistemology of the natural world was defining and long-lasting. The book provided the visual and literary arts with many allegorical scenarios populated with fantastical animals and plants. The realism of classical art no longer mattered because the word of God had become the one and only lens through which the world could be seen and understood. Images became subjugated by, and dependent upon, God's

word alone. The representation of plants and animals became secondary—most regularly, animals represented the darker side of humanity. They posed threats and challenges as the manifestation of the irrational and the evil. Plants usually served as a backdrop. Besides the tree of knowledge, around which the original drama of humanity unfolded, the rest of the vegetal world was transfigured by the word of God into a mass of generic conglomeration of shapes and forms that more often only fill a void in the representational plane.

Thereafter, the resurgence of realism as a celebration of God's creation changed the history of plant representation in art. During the Renaissance artists' ability to capture the specific semblance of animals and plants was sought after as the skill to accurately record the great variety of the divine creation. The recovery of the empirical method of scientific inquiry, the rise of drawing from life, and the commercial drive which compelled artists to capture the semblance of the wealthy commissioners that paid for art, led to an unprecedented revolution of the gaze. The possibility to better and more accurately identify plants proposed a new symbolic order. Individual plants began to carry a signature—a specific symbolic seal that gave them a (human) voice.

In the case of this painting, it is not a coincidence that the Madonna should be sheltered by a lush trellis upon which a lemon shrub sprawls. The lemon is associated with the sun because of its coloration. During the Renaissance, lemons were considered efficient antidotes to poisons and served as disinfectant. These practical qualities were associated with the reparational and healing essence of the Virgin Mary as were its fragrant white flowers, which symbolized purity and tenderness.

Because of the meanings associated with it, the realism with which the plant was represented became a crucial feature in Renaissance painting—a misrepresented plant would compromise the iconography of the painting, misattributing qualities to a sacred figure. It is in this way that the paradox characterizing the representation of plants in western art unfolds: we see plants in paintings, but the symbolic order makes them invisible to us—it prevents us from focusing on them as active subjects in the painting and to discover anything important about their plant-being. It is in this sense that plants are, practically and metaphorically, always relegated to the background in western art; even when they seem to play a key role, they are flattened, reduced, and hollowed out.

[Fig. 0.1]
Correggio
Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist, 1515. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

Louise Moillon
Still-Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Bunch of Asparagus, 1630

and

Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris
Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain, 1658

Louise Moillon was an outstandingly talented artist whose ability to capture the minute details of animals and plants made her famous across Europe. The still-life genre emerged from the complex socio-political shifts that characterized the 16th century. The Protestant Reformation's objection to the representation of religious images caused artists to look elsewhere for their income. In the Netherlands, artists turned to the painting of still-life themes like game and flower arrangements as steady sources of revenue. While portraits had to be commissioned, paintings of flowers and fruits could be made and stored in the workshop, waiting for the visit of a passing buyer. It is therefore not surprising that still-life paintings were, in fact, religious images in disguise. In early modern Europe, Christianity was the powerhouse of symbolic meaning. The word of God was still intertwined with everything natural and everything natural appeared more than ever subjugated by God's power. Most regularly, flowers symbolized God's wealth and the transitory nature of beauty, and youth. But above all, still-life paintings functioned as *memento mori*: the reminder to remain humble for whatever riches one might accrue in life will be eventually taken away at God's will.

Flowers and fruits were thus juxtaposed following a strict symbolic order, rather than a realistic one. In many instances, still-life paintings disrespected the natural flowering cycles of the plants represented. All flowers and fruits appeared 'frozen' at the height of their beauty and freshness. Moreover, cut flowers were expensive and not available year-round. So, these paintings would enable the appreciation of the diversity of colors and shapes in the botanical world during the darkest depths of winter. The vast majority of flowers were lifted from botanical treaties and herbaria, which provided ready-made representations of plants and flowers to be assembled in always new and different compositions.

The canister painted by Moillon and the flower composition of Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Marisa are classic examples of how symbolism and objectification of plants and fruits work. Moillon's composition alludes to the mature phase of life in which one harvests the fruits of a youth spent learning and perfecting skills and talents. But

accomplishment and fulfillment in life are, at this moment in time, always the reward of a fervent and devoted religious faith. It is thus that cherries alluded to the blood of Christ on the cross; grapes reinforced the importance of Christ's sacrifice and the holiness of the Eucharist; dark plums also underlined Christ's passion while peaches might have referenced the holy trinity. In his *Natural History,* Pliny asserted that peaches are constituted by the pulp, the stone, and the seed inside it. This observation, like many others from classical culture, was transposed and appropriated by Christianity. The bunch of asparagus on the foreground might be referencing prosperity and fertility since the plant shoots were considered a delicacy only few could afford. Counterpartying asparagus, the peculiar fava pod containing only two beans might allude to prosperity, although in this specific case, the artist might be more directly referencing the sacredness of the family unit with the beans symbolizing the mother and the father and the peas their daughters and sons—another reference to the mature stage of life.

Given that the overall meaning of the painting is imbued with references to death and to the passion of Christ, it is perhaps not a surprise that a black fly should be spotted sitting on a grape. At the time this painting was made, the theory of spontaneous generation claimed that flies and other animals emerged directly from rotting matter. For this reason, flies represented death and decay—the reminder that death awaits all of us and that a life worth living can only be fulfilled by faith and devotion.

While flies were regularly hidden in still-life paintings, Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris's *Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* bears the prominent depiction of a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly. In this case, the butterfly alludes to the human soul. Its weightless grace was central to the classical myth of Psyche. But the Christian appropriation of the symbol focuses more on the metamorphic stages which it associates with the resurrection of the soul. In this still-life painting, the flowers and plants more distinctively allude to love and fidelity while the beautifully render curtain covering the right-hand side of the painting might be a reference to the unavoidable incumbency of death—the moment in which the curtain is drawn once and for all.

[Fig. 0.2]
Louise Moillon
Still-Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Bunch of Asparagus, 1630
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

[Fig. 0.3]
Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris
Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain, 1658
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

Carl Blechen
The Interior of the Palm House on the Pfaueninsel Near Potsdam, 1834

and

Franz Ludwig Catel
Inside the Colosseum, 1823

These paintings prompt an interesting comparison between plants we cultivate and those we don't, and the cultural values we attribute to both categories. The exotic plants we see in Blechen's work are marked by the colonialist desire the possess and subjugate. The weeds in Catel's painting speak of past glories.

Greenhouses and botanic gardens originated during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when European kings and aristocrats displayed their wealth and power by gathering rare naturalia and precious artifacts. The cabinets of curiosities in which these objects were housed entailed a complex intermingling of knowledge, power, and economic wealth. To place nature in a delimited man-made space, be it live animals in menageries or taxidermy specimens in cabinets, had become the essential precondition of the emerging discipline of natural history. This power/knowledge matrix was carried forward in scientific endeavor that followed during the Enlightenment. Therefore, "knowing" never was a matter of purely personal pleasure or individual bettering; it was a means to acquire a more privileged social position through the economic gain knowledge itself affords; something which in turn generates prestige—a specific form of socio-charismatic identity-power.

The greenhouses that emerged in the seventeenth century, further crystallized these power dynamics—as an epistemological space in which nature was organized and managed, curiosity, aestheticism, and connoisseurship further distinguished the gentlemen from the peasant. Perishable and sophisticated luxuries like exotic flowers and fruits symbolically stood in opposition to the lowliness of lettuces, potatoes, and onions.

It is not, therefore, a surprise that the centerpiece of this painting should be a group of odalisques painted in the fashionable style of the time. Orientalism, the objectifying trope through which western artists imagined and constructed a magical, retrograde, and sensually unbridled east was the very telling manifestation of colonialist power relations. Male artists who painted odalisques never traveled to see the harems of Turkish sultans—they would have never been allowed in. Like a forbidden fruit,

the odalisque played a complex role in the desire of white gentlemen who dreamed of polygamy as a transgressive form of freedom from western "civilized" ways of living. Casting eastern women as "wild", just like the plants which surround them, enabled and fueled a dream-economy in which plants and women appeared equally objectified as tokens in an escapist narrative written by patriarchy. Passivity is key. Like plants, these odalisques should remain silent and only provide pleasure within the objectified remit they are allowed to inhabit. Confined within the glass walls of the greenhouse and its utopian, heavenly suspension, plants and women, thus, fulfilled a fantasy in which the passification of the other appears purposeful, justified, and most importantly, beautiful. In this painting, the greenhouse no longer is just a means to the survival of displaced plants, but an apt metaphorical representation of the workings of the western mind.

Catel's canvas provides a different, in many ways complementary, image of the relationship between patriarchal values and plants. In this painting, the artist immortalizes an all-male group busy contemplating and discussing the greatness of past classical glories. Plants aren't the focus, yet their presence is essential. The Grand Tour was a prestigious opportunity for the aristocratic gentleman of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Traveling to Italy, Spain, Greece, and sometimes as far as North Africa, was an incomparable formative stage in the lives of the privileged.

Amongst the ruins of the Colosseum, the unkept growth of plants becomes central to the layered meaning inscribed in the painting. The ruins of the most famous Roman arena are covered in a variety of weeds—native plants that freely grow, untamed. Their spontaneity and lushness are a reminder of the historical value of the architectural remains—they highlight the loss of function and embody the sedimentation of historical memory. The weeds that grow everywhere around the Roman ruin, thus, function as a reminder of past glories humanity should aspire to.

In this scene, the implied intellect of the men represented in the foreground constitutes the rationalizing and redemptive force capable of seeing past the uncultivated growth that perturbs the rational clarity and functionality of classical architecture. But simultaneously, the lush growth alludes to the naturalization of classical culture itself—it reassesses its timelessness and its originality as the root of western culture.

[Fig. 0.4]
Carl Blechen
The Interior of the Palm House on the Pfaueninsel Near Potsdam, 1834
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

[Fig. 0.5]
Franz Ludwig Catel
Inside the Colosseum, 1823
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

Claude Monet
Water Lilies, 1906

The latter part of Monet's life was spent painting his garden in Giverny. He moved there in 1883 after his paintings found commercial success in the United States. Today, his water lilies are an art historical cliché—celebrated by the expert and venerated by the novice; this probably is the best known floral chapter in early modern art. However, despite the admiration for the near-abstract experimentations with color and brushstrokes, history of art has not dwelled much over the relationship between the artist and the plants. Monet was a fond horticulturalist. Not only would he tend to his plants personally with the help of assistants; he also experimented with hybridizing dahlias, irises, and poppies, a variety of which he called *Moneti*.

Monet's interest in water lilies began in 1889 when botanist Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac exhibited his hybridized specimens in the Trocadéro fountains at World's Fair in Paris. To that point, water lilies were only white, so it was inevitable that the yellow and pink varieties exhibited by Latour-Marliac would catch the artist's eye. We also know that many of his water lilies were cultivars imported directly from Egypt and South America. The town council opposed the import of the exotic varieties and ordered the artist to rip them up. He ignored them. There is something slightly perverse about this underexposed piece of knowledge: the idea that Monet's waterlilies, the quintessential romantic staple of bourgeois imaginary actually was the result of selective breeding and hybridization gives the paintings a new, and more modern edge. That they also broke the law makes their bold beauty even more seductive.

Monet's choice of subject matter for his many paintings was grounded in a personal passion for plants, rather than from the desire to convey encoded religious symbolism. From the very beginning, Impressionism rejected symbolism in favor of documenting the optical impression of everyday-life as conjured by its surfaces and the effects of light upon them. The lack of details in impressionist paintings meant that Monet never needed herbaria as source books for his work. Dialectics of color and light is all there is to see—the water lilies are transfigured: plant-being is dissolved through brushstrokes that become one with the water, the sky, and the foliage that surrounds them.

Let's not forget that Monet started to paint water lilies in 1897–99, at the very end of a century that saw a substantial fragmentation of artistic realities and movements in Europe. Through this period, realism in art became a political bone of contention—one equally ideologically

charged with highly conservative values or with revolutionary ideals. The invention of photography (1826) problematized matters further by materializing blurred/out of focus images right under the eyes of the artists. Blurred photographs, the failed attempts to capture optical reality during the mid-nineteenth century, were very inspirational to Monet and other Impressionists. What was at stake in this representational unclarity produced by the mechanical eye? To a degree, a process of de-objectification. Blurred photographs broke the straightforward linguistic connection between form and content—they inserted hesitation where once was affirmation. They shattered the sensual finitude of surfaces and focused on a broader overview of interconnectedness.

Epistemologically, this was a moment of paramount importance in the history of Western art—one that history of art usually simplifies through the notion of style or the biographical knowledge that Monet was losing his eyesight. But Monet's water lilies are amongst the very first paintings about plants and flowers to embody this new "freedom of the image." Open form and lack of detail-free the represented body from many economic, social, and cultural implications—Monet's water lilies appear interconnected with everything else around them: the sky, the water, the grass, the overhanging trees, and the human eye that perceives them. There are an eco-continuity and interconnectedness at play in these paintings that is unprecedented in the history of representation—one that simultaneously operates through the medium of paint as an ontological equalizer, and one that bypasses any notion of scientific epistemology in representation. In more than one way, it is with the water lilies that a truly modern, and perhaps more than modern history of plant-representation begins.

[Fig. 0.6]
Claude Monet
Water Lilies, 1906
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

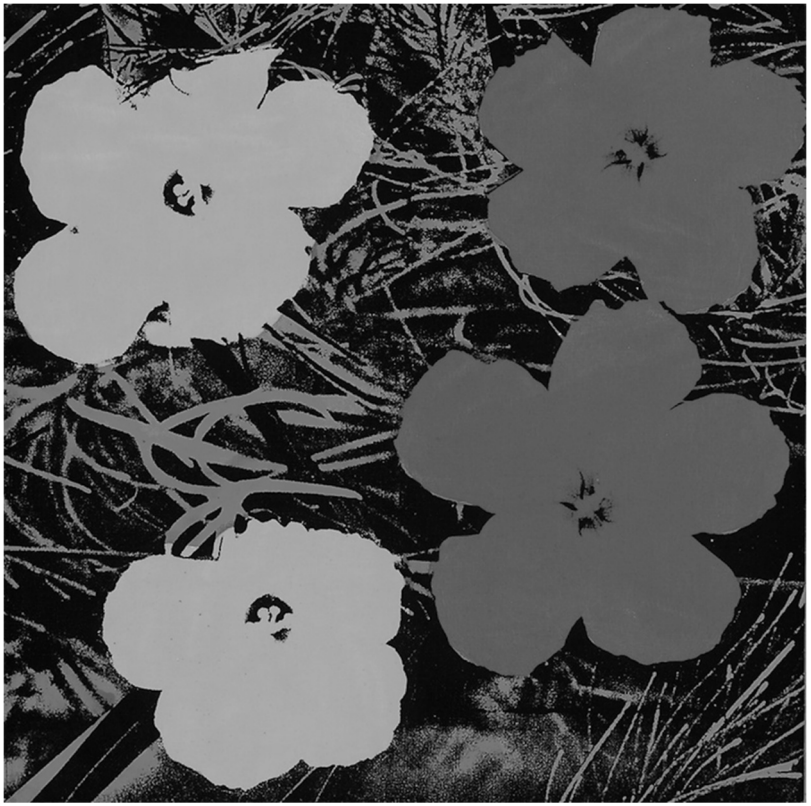
Andy Warhol
Flowers, 1964

Andy Warhol's flower are another good example of how art history and the art historical marketing machine can oversimplify a subject matter in order to provide viewers with easily digestible pin-up images. But Andy Warhol's many iterations of flowers are more complex than it first might appear. As it is known, Warhol's trademark screen-print technique entailed appropriating images from the work of commercial or news photographers. This *modus operandi* involves an important conceptual dimension—it is the manifestation of the capitalist condition through which we know the world we live in. More often than not, our understanding of nature is mediated by images of animals and plants we see in magazines or on the screens of our TVs and computers. John Berger's 'Why look at Animals?' focused on this very contingency and how photography sets unattainable expectations of the natural world which inevitably diminish our less mediated encounters.

In the case of his flowers series, this very mediatedness is further problematized by the nature of the original image being used and what this image originally represented. The black and white shot used by Warhol was an image taken by Patricia Caulfield published in a 1964 issue of *Modern Photography*. Rather interestingly, it is not the photograph of a grassy field dotted by daisies, as many assume, but a composition of exotic hibiscus blooms woven into arranged straw—the table centerpiece at a Barbados restaurant.

That Warhol's engineering of the original image should fake a naturalness it never possessed is indicative of the alienation from plants which consumerism enables. In popular culture, flowers become patterns—anonymous blotches of color summoning a generic idea of naturalness through utter artificiality. It is in this sense that his multiple reproductions in different colors, none of which necessary belong to the hibiscus varieties in the paintings, constitute a further distancing from our conception of flowers and nature. With every repetition, the anonymity of the flowers becomes a referent of themselves and in themselves—nature is purely constructed for our aesthetic enjoyment.

In a way, Warhol's flowers embody the very essence of the many cultivars we buy from gardening centers around the world—the original size, shape, and color of the flowers altered to match our aesthetic expectations. Nature and culture effortlessly intermingle in the morphologies of these plants which have been redesigned to suit our purposes, please our gaze, and remind us that we ultimately have the ability to change nature at our will.



[Fig. 0.7]
Andy Warhol
Flowers, 1964
Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

INTRODUCTION: BOTANICAL SPECULATIONS

GIOVANNI ALOI

This book gathers the proceedings of the symposium held in September 2017 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. *Botanical Speculations* is the result of a year and half of research and preparation among faculty and students attending undergraduate and graduate courses at the school. It emerged from shared interests for the botanical world among faculty and students and it paved the way for more non-human/posthuman/Anthropocene dialogues to unravel.

Plants have for millennia served as the static backdrop of human dramas. Despite being some of the most indispensable pillars of our planet's biosystems, plants' fixity and laconic essence have meant that they can be wilfully overlooked, ignored, and written out of history, just like animals have. But more than animals, in popular conceptions, plants are ontologically aligned with "the resource" and "the medium" more than the living. They provide food and wood for our sustenance and infrastructure. Our relationship with them is predominantly based on disposability. We plant, grow, harvest and cut down as needed, rarely, if ever, considering what we could learn from our silent companions.

Abandoning the anthropocentric framework we have inherited from our parents and teachers during our formative years is not a simple task. State propaganda education films produced in Europe and the United States during the 1950s reconfigured our relationship to plants and environments through a pragmatic, capitalist framework in which trees and plants are nothing more than commodities to manage and resources to exploit. The message was clear: "manage the environment in order to grant your kids as a sustainable future". However, despite the good intentions, something in these propagandistic messages hasn't worked. Regardless of their immense biodiversity value, since the 1960's nearly half of the world's rainforest have been lost. It is estimated that every day, roughly 81.000 hectares, an area nearly 14 times the size of Manhattan, is destroyed to make space for agriculture and to produce timber. The rate of deforestation is such that about 36 football fields worth of trees are lost

every minute.[1] And of course, the destructive effects of deforestation are not limited to erosion and deterioration of soil or the loss of biodiversity. It is estimated that deforestation causes the loss of roughly 137 species of plants, insects and other animals every day.[2] Approximately 20% of the world greenhouse emission is generated by deforestation. The loss of trees has a deep impact on the hydrological system of this planet too. Cleared forest lead to drier local climates since water is no longer retained in their roots and foliage but evaporates straight into the atmosphere. This leads to desertification of the soil and vulnerability to flooding.

Although everyone's attention is focussed on melting glaciers, it is worth remembering that deforestation is a catastrophe of equal importance and one that vastly contributes to the phase of climate change that we are currently experiencing. On October 24th it was announced that the world entered a new era of 'climate change reality' defined by the crossing of 400 Co2 parts per million in the atmosphere—a level which will not dip for many generations.[3] This news was followed by the startling revelation that Arctic and Antarctic sea-ice reached record lows and that it is melting much faster than scientists had anticipated.[4] More recently, in July 2017 an iceberg twice the size of Luxemburg (5,800 km)broke off the Antarctic peninsula.[5] Despite the denial which seems to pervade the current US administration, signs that something is changing are undeniable. So, while the label 'sixth extinction' is widely being used to help us envision the gravity of the current changes in climatic balance, not much is actually known about how plants, upon which all biodiversity on the planet rests, will be affected. A 2015 study claims that

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[1] Bradford, Alina. (4 March 2015) *Deforestation: Facts, Causes & Effects.* Livescience.com. Retrieved 02/12/2018

[2] Rainforest Facts. Rain-tree.com (20 March 2018). Retrieved 02/12/2018

[3] Press Association, (2016) ''New era of climate change reality' as emissions hit symbolic threshold' in *The Guardian*, Monday, October 24th, online: [https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/24/new-era-of-climate-change-reality-as-emissions-hit-symbolic-threshold] accessed on November 10th 2016

[4] Fountain, H. and Schwartz, J. (2016) 'Spiking Temperatures in the Arctic Startle Scientists' in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, December 21st, online: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/21/science/arctic-global-warming.html] Retrieved 12/21/2017

[5] *Viñas, M-J. (2017) 'Massive Iceberg Breaks Off From Antartica' in Nasa website, published on July 12th, online: [https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2017/massive-iceberg-breaks-off-from-antarctica] retrieved 07/30/2017*