

# GU WOMXN

Flimsies (small act of care)

## Overview

On the 11 July 2019, GU Womxn\* spent the day at the South London Botanical Institute (SLBI) – a relatively unknown botanical library, gardens & herbarium archive, discretely situated in Tulse Hill, South London. Founded in 1910 the collection houses and maintains 250,000 specimens from the British Isles and Europe dating from the early 1800s & the most recent addition to the collection in 2010.

With an open and speculative approach, our intention was to learn about processes of cultivation, tending-to & preservation within the practice of botany, through conversations with volunteers & botanists, who care for the archive and gardens. In an economic and political climate that strives for perpetual growth divorced from the earth, we sought to generate a wider dialogue, in relation to ecological interdependencies as a potential model for collective practice & explore the collection as a metaphor for an alternative economy, based upon the values of care, attentiveness & a slow accumulation of objects & knowledge.

A herbarium is a collection of dried pressed plants mounted on sheets accompanied by collecting details & the sheets are arranged to reflect similarities and relationships between plants. Floor to ceiling metal cabinets run around the perimeter of the herbarium at SLBI – the metal keeps the specimens cool and insect-free. Stored within the cabinets are many folders, which donate the family, then the genus and then the species. The flimsies are temporary holding folders for the specimens and are made of archival

paper material equivalent to a sheet of newsprint, which is used in a plant press to preserve plants form and colour. The herbarium leads out to a greenhouse and garden beyond – we were invited to eat the loquats, sit by the pond and wander through the weed and dye gardens.

Resonant of a flimsy, this work is formed of individual and collective memories, thoughts and responses which link our experience at the SLBI with wider discussions around the complex and often compromised practice of botany, its historical lineage, social impact and practical applications. Contemplating ideas in relation to knowledge-making & feminist ethics of care, we have considered what we may adopt, question or resist from the herbarium. Each contribution has developed from our initial conversations, during the research day at SLBI in June & has yielded ideas in relation to: decentralising a dominant western scientific epistemology; embodied ways of knowing; poetry and the haptic nature of preservation and a consideration of the historical methods of archiving and recording ephemeral materials.

\* GU Womxn is a group of writer's curators, artists and researchers who all have a connection to Grand Union studios in Birmingham. Established in 2018 GU Womxn prioritises mentorship, supportive exchange, sharing knowledge, networks and resources. And for this particular project, learning and expanding ways of working together through pursuing common interests and being in one another's company.

## Anna & Anita

Using only the light of the sun and some simple chemistry, Anna, you accumulated ghosts in fields of brilliant blue. As a botanist you captured lasting impressions of intricate and tangled life forms, from seaweed, algae and ferns - a particular favourite. To study, to document and preserve, these small moments of noticing amassed a collection of thousands of cyanotype prints.

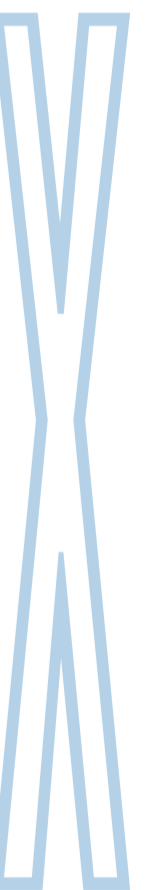
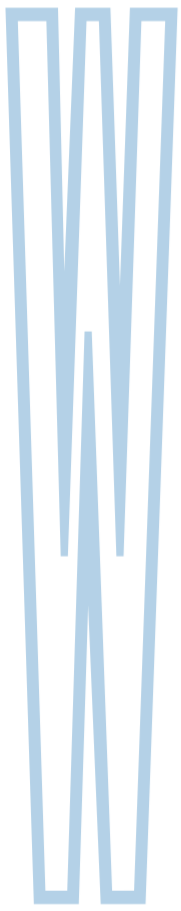
Specimens delicately placed on light sensitive paper and exposed to the action of light triggers a chemical reaction, developing a pigment called Prussian blue. Rinsing the paper with water reveals the underlying image. Unexposed white veins and stems silhouetted. Like flimsies, each and every image comes into direct contact with the specimen it represented.

In a pre-camera era, the acts of creating a cyanotype and flower pressing seem historically linked to me. Pressed plants mounted on sheets of paper ostensibly deny disintegration. Moving these documents is a gentle and careful performance on a scale I had not previously imagined. If you remember, Anita, you gifted me a small flower press as a child. It was square with wing nuts in each corner and an illustration of a pansy on the top, I would stack layers of paper and card with flowers from my mother's

garden in the press. It filled me with the capacity to look at the finite within our immediate surroundings.

The commitment to preserving and communicating environmental knowledge holds deep resonance, that which is passed down, passed on. Anna & Anita, your acts of care emerge and live through place. The herbarium, stacked with flimsies of individual specimens represent each personal encounter with the land, I lay them out before me, herbs and fauna that have outlived generations.

Anna Atkins (1799 - 1871) a botanist often considered the first female photographer. She is known for creating botanical photo books, contributing to both scientific and artistic disciplines.





**“ACROSS THE COUNTRY THERE ARE MANY MINING AREAS, DISUSED QUARRIES AND POLLUTED LAKES AND RIVERS. ONE PRACTICAL SOLUTION FOR THE UTILISATION OF SUCH DEVASTATED PLACES WOULD BE LAND AND WATER RECYCLING IN TERMS OF ‘EARTH ART.’ RECENTLY, WHEN I WAS IN HOLLAND, I WORKED IN A SAND QUARRY THAT WAS SLATED FOR REDEVELOPMENT. THE DUTCH ARE ESPECIALLY AWARE OF THE PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE. A DIALECTIC BETWEEN LAND RECLAMATION AND MINING USAGE MUST BE ESTABLISHED. THE ARTIST AND THE MINER MUST BECOME CONSCIOUS OF THEMSELVES AS NATURAL AGENTS. IN EFFECT, THIS EXTENDS TO ALL KINDS OF MINING AND BUILDING. WHEN THE MINER OR BUILDER LOSES SIGN OF WHAT HE IS DOING THROUGH THE ABSTRACTIONS OF TECHNOLOGY HE CANNOT PRACTICALLY COPE WITH NECESSITY THE WORLD NEEDS COAL AND HIGHWAYS, BUT WE DO NOT NEED THE RESULTS OF STRIP-MINING OR HIGHWAY TRUSTS. ECONOMICS, WHEN ABSTRACTED FROM THE WORLD, IS BLIND TO NATURAL PROCESSES. ART CAN BECOME A RESOURCE, THAT MEDIATES BETWEEN THE ECOLOGIST AND THE INDUSTRIALIST. ECOLOGY AND INDUSTRY ARE NOT ONE-WAY STREETS, RATHER THEY SHOULD BE CROSSROADS. ART CAN HELP TO PROVIDE THE NEEDED DIALECTIC BETWEEN THEM. A LESSON CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE INDIAN CLIFF DWELLINGS AND EARTHWORKS MOUNDS. HERE WE SEE NATURE AND NECESSITY IN CONSORT.”**

Robert Smithson, 'Untitled' in Robert Smithson: Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.) 376.

# G

**Knowledge as a Resource**  
 Knowledge is our resource and our product, sustaining the collectives' belief that there is a 'flat' organisation, anti-hierarchical in its distribution of labour, and open to restless streams of intelligence from all its contributors and collaborators. These collaborative inputs are disseminated social and spatial entities which no single artist holds lead on the production of knowledge or power over its distribution. We can see the portents of larger variations, where the dissemination of contemporary knowledge production offers freedom to form local subjects and willing collectives.

I was uneasy with the demand of visibility and hyper-production under which I often feel I need to meet as an artist. In one of our first meetings together, we discussed that as a platform of collaboration, we avoid the often-isolating conditions that artists so often end up working in through working together. On the contrary, our platform enabled us to build interpersonal relations with other artists and to perhaps 'dilute' the solitary nature of being an artist.

“...immaterial labour, which is defined as the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity”  
 — Marianna Cage, *Marketing is Violent*, 2012.

The 'great transformation' that began in the 1970s has changed the terms where we discuss manual labour. Manual labour is now progressively coming to require strategies that could be defined as 'intellectual', where newer communications increasingly require subjectivities that are rich in knowledge. It is important to note that it is not simply that intellectual labour has become exposed to the norms of capitalist (hyper-) production. What has developed is

that a new 'mass intellectuality' (Rags Media Collective, 2004) has come into existing, perhaps that was formed out of a combination of the forms of 'self-valorization' and the demands of capitalist production that the struggle surrounding, and against, work has created. The tired dichotomy between 'mental labour' and 'manual labour' also falls into a sub-dichotomy between 'material labour' and 'immaterial labour' and prospectively chances failing to encompass the new nature of productive artist activity, or, 'visible means' of production. The dichotomy shifts and transforms through a semi-tangible process.

The shepherd is a telling bio-gauge of the health and strength of our rural system. If we let the shepherd disappear through lack of acclimatised changes needed to meet the growing population, we will lose an important source of knowledge about how to deal with the complexities of how to conceive the necessary transition of our societies, practices, and lifestyles to sustainability. We need the shepherd to learn how to manage natural and common resources and how to produce sustainably, both in any physical outcome we produce and to ensure we are fair on ourselves as artists and as practitioners before we reach burn out. I am talking about the well being of the artist as their own ecosystem, which is equally vital. As such the city artist needs the shepherd or the rural artist for this bio-indication of sustainability.

“In the city, the terms of dwelling and perceptions of social agency are often aleatory. While the urban economy is governed by a tendency toward informality and improvisation within the capitalist economy, the rural community is entirely tethered to a preindustrial agrarian past.”  
 — Okwui Enwezor, *Huit Façettes*, 2007

## Capitalist Logic/Denying Local Knowledge

Today marks that for the first time in human history, the global population outnumbers the rural population. This does not imply a triumphant tipping towards urban culture, but instead does echo a capitalist logic towards indigenous populations and land. The capitalist logic was initiated with the enclosure of land for agriculture and farming, then closely monitored with strategic geopolitics, and finalised with the industrialisation of the cities; all that favour consumers and wage labourers over subsistence and commoners.

Vandana Shiva urges for the balance and counteraction against monoculturalisation by denying local knowledge and value, implying to the slow eradication of local rural and agricultural practices. Its oscillating design and revision of hierarchical pedagogies (instead, that everyone is learning and teaching) is an example for a self-coordinated, interdependent, local framework on a transnational scale.

The Hanunoo people in the Philippines leave no room for 'dominant forestry' and Western botany. The Hanunoo can divide their native plants into 1,600 differentiated and characterized categories of genus and sub-genus, where 'trained' botanists

can only distinguish 1,200. The lived experiences and diverse and complex knowledge systems that have evolved with the many uses of the forest for food, shelter, agriculture, tools and uses of all kinds were cast in the shadow of the introduction of 'scientific' forestry, which considered the forest only as a source of industrial, commercial and capitalist functions. The interconnection between agriculture and the forest were fractured and the uses of the forest as a source of food became indistinguishable.

“The disappearance of local knowledge through its interaction with the dominant western knowledge takes place at many levels, through many steps. First, local knowledge is made to disappear by simply not seeing it, by negating its very existence. This is very easy in the distant gaze of the globalising dominant system. The western systems of knowledge have generally been viewed as universal.”  
 — Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind*, 1993]



### Western Science

The universal and local dichotomy is lost when it is applied to the westernised categories of knowledge. The western is largely interpreted as a local tradition, spread globally through 'intellectual' colonisation, hybridisation of plants and the collection of botany throughout centuries of western invades.

The monocultures of introduced plant varieties lead to the displacement and destruction of local natural diversity. The Latinisation of scientific names assigned to plants and animals on harvesting implies a kind social immunity to its geo-history, traditional uses and heritages when introduced to the Western system. We accept that modern western science is not to be implied, critically evaluated or questioned; it is merely widely accepted. Western science achieved this status by elevating itself above other local knowledge systems and societies by, simultaneously, excluding other knowledge and lived experiences from the rightful territory of long-established and systematic knowledge. Scientists, in conformity of a methodical scientific system, were viewed as putting forward statements directly in response to the realities of a directly observed environment. This powerful structure forms its absolute ownership and exclusive monopoly.

Artists and organisations that exist and work outside of the city, perhaps in the rural, share common ground of limited visibility or relative invisibility of the work they make. A certain degree of remoteness only generally allows only for small audiences. With this, comes and a lack of 'established' art groundwork to lift exposure, endorse and disperse the activities beyond their small village-

centred materiality. The practice of art in the rural environment should not be driven by size-scoring buildings nor lead by 'audience development' strategies. Instead it needs to be directed by the inquiry of how to dismantle the audience core and look to focus on the connections between art and the normal, ordinary commonplace, establishing these links as political and social capacities of co-producing culture to practically translate finance and 'market-orientated art' to reframe what cultural production can become.

### Hybridisation

The term 'cultural hybrid' or in a plant-focused realm 'hybridisation' (in relation to hybrid plants) is more commonly and widely used when two or more cultures exist in one place or come together. It is applied with the same level of ease as the label 'fusion' cuisine. However, it is important that we emphasize the importance of the need to examine the specific context of both, and all, cultures involved. It should be stressed that hybridity does not take place when one culture simply absorbs the other. It is this ongoing complex process of entanglement between cultures where this interaction is not harmonious, in many arguments against how multiculturalism generally perceives itself. In the finale of this interaction, a third new layer is born where new forms and new cultures, to some extent, can be created. This is true with the slowly but increasing visibility of non-western and cross-cultural artists over the recent decade. This needs to be at the fundamental of every arts organisation in order enable a broadening understanding of how we can support all cultures in contemporary visual art.

“What I felt in a range of discussions of cultural power is that it often is imagined as two forces that clash, like the 'clash of civilisations' idea. They come equipped with all their own ideas, philosophies, values, etc., and they clash: somebody wins, somebody loses. My interest always was, what happens when they clash? They are negotiating – even with a big asymmetry – different forms of power and authority. [...] Hybridisation is therefore all the meanings, positions, movements, negotiations around difference and power generated in that space. It is a particular strategy and it is a strategy in the context of a larger struggle for authority.” — (Homi K. Bhabha & Zoë Gray, In Conversation with Solange de Boer, 2006)

# M

### Knowledge (re)production

In by wiping local knowledge invisible by rendering it non-existent, absent, or illegitimate (in one instance through the Latinisation of plant names), the winning system also causes alternatives to become absent by destroying and appropriating the history and realities in that they try to represent. The disseminated linearity of the winning knowledge interrupts any integrations between these systems. Local knowledge conveniently falls through the fractures during the process of appropriating it and writing its new history. It no longer belongs to the world in which it was taken from. The winning scientific knowledge breathes a monoculture by creating voids for alternatives to disappear into, as seen in monocultures of plant species, it heads into the displacement of the culture and the local diversity.

For the necessity of learning to act at a time of fearing a global environmental crisis, our neo-capitalist logic is directed by a crisis of reproduction, where the foundation of things produced are in precarious times. Many citizens like us want to be active with much needed reproductive work and determine the changes we wish to see. What agency gives us mechanisms for coping? Resisting? How do we change our

conditions to encourage alternatives and to allow other worlds to be possible that is independent from what we have done as practitioners, activists, artists, students, citizens, researchers, teachers, scientists and interdependencies? How do we prepare and anticipate for sustainable work at a local and translocal scale?

### Diverse Economies & Diverse Pedagogies

The Eco-Nomadic School is a network for locally-based projects from across Europe that have been visiting each other to learn, teach, share and discover the knowledge held in their communities for the last 10 years. The school, in its broadest definition, came from the motivation and conviction that education and pedagogy do not necessarily take place in institutions, but within civic and social realm in alternative political initiatives and activist intentions ultimately existing in everyday life. The Eco-Nomadic School is the open organisation that would prepare society for sustainable practice.

In subcontext of Paeolo Friere's writings, The Eco-Nomadic School expands the nexus of education to forms and formats that do not exist within the current institutional frameworks, based on what terms that is radical inclusivity. It promotes that civic education shares the belief of supporting and reproducing of everyday life as common knowledge across places, local education and cultures.

Katherine Gibson has coined the term 'diverse economies' as a platform to discuss the many initiatives of economic autonomy that are increasingly more common worldwide which speak a system of economic differences as an alternative coping strategy to the current capitalist logics. This system can be understood similarly to a rhizome in plants; a rooting

subterranean stem that splits off horizontally from the main stem to produce new shoots to the surface. We can only see the visible plant from above ground, as we can only interpret our capitalist economy we are situated within, where outside the economy, or beneath the ground exists huge mass economies, or huge mass plant networks. Beneath the ground holds the network for sustaining life to the plant, as is true for the 'other' economies that sustain life for more of the global population than ours supports.

The same can be applied to education and 'diverse pedagogies' in the same way 'diverse economies' can be applied to capitalist logic, stressing the importance of their inclusivity and heterogeneity fluidly transporting across formal and informal education, within city communities and within the rural. The Eco-Nomadic School is without set locations and independent from fixed institutions to reject a hierarchical logic or affiliations towards diverse knowledge. As the same with diverse economies, diverse pedagogies too fit under the small, visible, rhizomatic part of capitalist institutional education.

Guattari, who I often intangibly attempt to approach through Deleuze, introduces 'transversality' to discuss independent and resilient subjectivities in the sense of capitalist logic. In this context, transversality engenders a new terrain to be transported beyond it that encompasses physical and social spheres of organising learning across a multitude of alternating planes: It is not symptomatic nor hierarchical and creates unexpected and continually

evolving positions. In A Thousand Plateaus, Guattari and Deleuze identify the nomad from the anatomy of the migrant. The nomad is described to be unstable, vulnerable and without fixed ground, in a position of displacement of any fixed logic. Whereas the migrant has choice over where they travel, understood in terms of trajectories. The migrant and the nomad are visitors, and travellers, who receives recognition on arrival and on departure. As for the nomad, they demonstrate the knowledge at given circumstances to be totally ignorant of customs of habitual practice, yet the nomad becomes the transmitter of impulses and information across the globe. The nomad transforms into universal knowledge never to be questioned or critically evaluated, but to be merely accepted.

“In a decisive move towards self-analysis, (scientific) discourse today has begun to re-examine languages in order to isolate their (its) models or patterns. In other words, since the social practice (the economy, mores, 'art', etc.) is envisaged as a signifying system that is 'structures like a language', any practice can be scientifically studied as a secondary model in relation to natural language, modelled on this language and in turn becomes a model or pattern for it.”  
 — Julia Kristeva, *Semiotics: A Critical Science and/or a Critique of Science*, 1969.

Larissa Shaw

## I could smell lavender. (floral, spicy, earthy, balsam, gum, sap)

It hadn't taken long – maybe 30 minutes of scaling the narrow, chalky quarry footpaths, carved out by bike tyres & dog walkers. Left bare, the surfaces of mined stone formed shallow rock pools, populated by boulders of limestone & low, creeping rock stoncrop, grasses & flowering plants I am yet to know.

The last blooms, mostly grey and withered, on the way out for another year. The geographic coordinates on the specimens in the herbarium had brought me here, to Grove Lane on Portland, to the exact same location as the botanists in 1866, 153 years separated our field trips and our hominid bodies, yet the Portland Sea Lavender (*Limonium binervosum*) remained present, faithful to its perennial bloom.

I stayed for ages – by chance, there was a rock shaped like a seat just above the patch of Portland Sea Lavender, so I engineered by hominid body into the form and read some passages for 'The Peregrine' by JA Baker. It was a pretty great Sunday, but the irony is, Sea Lavender is not actually related to Lavender at all & does not share the distinctive smell of florals, spice, earth, balsam, gum & sap.

The Salicaceae is the Latin name of the family of dioecious trees or shrubs, commonly known as willows. Willows grow in temperate conditions & are commonly found near bodies of water, such as lakes or rivers. They perpetuate a bioremediation – a process of consuming and break down environmental pollutants, toxins and metal compounds, inadvertently, cleaning & filtering the water compounds.

In western science, the willow family was split into 2 genus; salix & poplar, with thousands of species between them. However new research within the field of morphology & phylogenetics has greatly expanded the circumscription of the family to contain 56 genera and about 1220 species.

Referring to hominids rather than humans helps us to move beyond the anthropocentric privilege of humanism and helps to remind us that we too are animals embedded in a world that isn't entirely of our own making.  
 — Stacey Alaimo

Imagining human corporeality (and I would argue, all corporeality) as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment."  
 — Stacey Alaimo

— Stacey Alaimo

my mind is cast back to the willows that populate the tolesbury fleet in Mersea – still veins of water which, at one end, meet the salt marsh & the intertidal zone & at the other, meet the Blackwater Estuary. Staked & submerged into the sediment, the willow reeds are used to pinpoint Native Oyster beds. Extracting Nutrients from this silty soil, the upright stems show new growth of rods, buds & leaves swimming high above the water.  
 — Emily Hawes

listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own.

During a recent lecture at South London Botanical Institute in Tulse Hill, Irina Belyaeva, researcher & botanist at Kew Gardens described how if we don't know the name, we don't know the plant. The practice of naming plantlife is known as nomenclature, distinctive from taxonomy, which is the branch of western science concerned with classification, especially of organisms; through systematics. Taxonomy, is as Belyaeva described, an objective science, as most people can agree upon type concepts, such as the catkin is a slim, cylindrical flower cluster, with inconspicuous or no petals. Whereas nomenclature, the system of naming a plant within the western botanical tradition, is highly objective.

When questioned, how we distinguish between languages, differing localities, geographies, common & colloquial names, uses within different cultural practices - & considering all these variables among more, how do we ascertain a common name, the answer was unsurprising; As Alaimo remarks at the beginning of *Bodily Natures*, there's a tendency throughout humanities and science studies to see matter as a blank slate contributing nothing of its own, but simply serving as a screen upon which humans project meanings, significations, and that humans transform into their technologies. We desperately need to move beyond this model of matter as blank screen if we're to think ecologically.  
 — Levi R. Bryant

I think that now it was a longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods that led me to science, to learn over the years to speak fluent botany. A tongue that should not, by the way, be mistaken for the language of plants. I did learn another language in science though, one of careful observation, an intimate vocabulary that names each little part. To name and describe you must first see, and science polishes the gift of seeing. I honour the strength of the language that has become  
 — Robin Wall Kimmerer

During the talk, Belyaeva shared insights into the medicinal lineages of willows – ancient Mesopotamian texts describe the leaves and bark as remedies for aches and fever. A temporary pain relief, a softening of the ache, my body drifts back to the quarry.

The herbarium specimens of willows are circulated at the end of the talk – I feel conflicted as they embody processes of maintenance & careful preservation, yet simultaneously represent a dominance over nature, complicit in wider cultural practices of invisibility. I am left wondering what we can gain, yield & return, from a more closely attuned relationship to the more than human world & how thinking on these terms will unearth the overlooked interdependencies at play between artefacts, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms & humans.  
 Emily Hawes

a second tongue to me. Beneath the richness of its vocabulary & its descriptive power, something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores.  
 — Robin Wall Kimmerer

It is common practice to reference the earliest recorded name, which in most cases tends to be Linnaeus.

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## In order to read nature we need a label

The flimies are stacked. Sophie Huckfield  
 Layer by layer, they formed a strata. Sediments of plantlife. C l a s s i f i e d .  
 Folded in and opened out.  
 A specimen. A fragment.  
 A Cracking of perspectives.  
 A fragment of a larger fragmentation. The classification layered and piled on top.  
 To form a lingering metaphor.  
 Acts of care give way. The steady hand supports.  
 Delicate hands, hold time.  
 Nature is a she. So we've been told. Nature is machine?  
 The flimsy a fragment itself we we sat spoke gestured.  
 A conflicting we are a set.  
 All knowledge is entropic. Scratchy call, splitting and disembodied reaching across voices space. Faces on a page. An interphase. Exchanging ideas we split and form again, to part but ideas remain entangled.  
 We confuse the world view as reality.  
 It is a flimsy circumstance.

