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What Plants Were Called before They Had a Name

Uriel Orlow, «Theatrum Botanicum», Kunsthalle St.Gallen

Philipp Spillmann

In his long-term artistic project *Theatrum Botanicum*, Uriel Orlow considers plants as actors on a political stage: protagonists of colonial trade, flower diplomacy, or bio-piracy. As such, they serve as a prism through which environmental colonial history can be re-negotiated. *Theatrum Botanicum* can be read as an attempt to decolonize both, history and nature. And for decolonizing nature, it is crucial how plants are considered as acting and living beings. If they tell stories about colonialism, how are they brought to speak?





Uriel Orlow, *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*, 2017, Videostill, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris, Photo: Austin Malema

Non-human beings have played a major role in colonial history since its very beginnings. This includes the appropriation of land and natural resources as well as the domestication, circulation, and alteration of animals and other creatures. Since colonialism is usually described in terms of human relationships, the environmental history of colonialism has widely been written as a story in which nature becomes altered by humans. In such narrations, non-human beings typically appear as objects, tools, or factors of colonial power.[1] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b1]But since «the colonization of nature … situated the non-human world as objectified, passive, and separate», as T. J. Demos recently argued, [2] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b2] the representation of non-human beings as tools and objects is itself framed by a narrative with which nature has been colonized.



Uriel Orlow, *Muthi*, 2016-2017, Videostill, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris

Putting the Non-Human into Play

The promise to de-colonize nature by making non-human beings speak is underlined by *Theatrum Botanicum*, a research-based artistic project by Uriel Orlow which has started in 2015 and was exhibited at Kunsthalle St. Gallen from April 14 to June 17, 2018. Throughout a broad spectrum of artistic practices, it investigates various roles that plants have played in both the colonial past and the postcolonial present of South Africa. As its title indicates, it considers «the botanical world as a political stage»[3] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b3]– a stage on which non-human beings along with humans become actors of a political theatre. And in this theatre, as Orlow explains on his website, plants appear «as both witnesses and actors in history, and as dynamic agents».[4] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b4] But what does that mean? Is the notion of plants as acting, observing, and speaking entities not just a figure of speech? If not, as what kinds of actors do they appear on the stage of this botanical play? And as such, how do they contribute to decolonizing nature?



Uriel Orlow, Ausstellungsansicht, *The Crown Against Mafavuke*, 2016; *MAFAVUKE – The One Who Dies and Lives Again, Part 1 & Part 2, 2018*, Detail; *Echoes*, 2018, Detail, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris, Photo: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier

Turning Plants into Soldiers

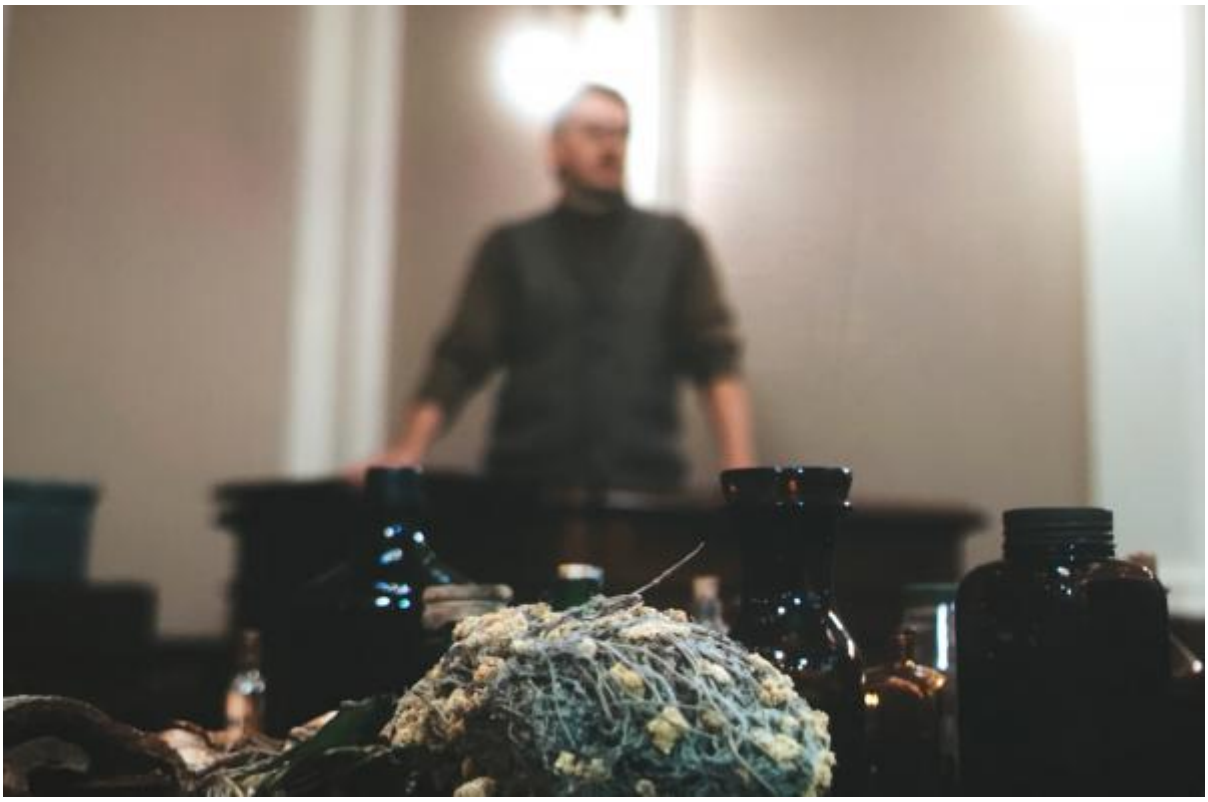
At Kunsthalle St. Gallen, Orlow assembled eight different works in six different rooms, including two from 2018. One of the centerpieces of the exhibition is *The Crown against Mafavuke* (2016), a film that theatrically re-enacts a trial that took place in South Africa in 1940, and thus allows to discuss Theatrum Botanicum literally as a political theatre.

On the level of the story, the film shows us how Mafavuke Ngcobo, a traditional herbalist, was accused of «untraditional behavior». The trial was an attempt of the white medical establishment to disqualify Mafavuke's practices and to terminate his and other tradition-based medicinal businesses. In order to achieve that, the prosecution, which acted in the name of the King, tried to prove that the practices of Mafavuke were actually not traditional by showing that many of the plants he used were not originally from South Africa. Hence, their point was to show that his underlying understanding of plants had nothing to do with their nature. And by claiming Mafavuke's view as almost entirely political, they could declare that their own understanding of plants was truly shaped after their nature.

EMBED
[https://player.vimeo.com/video/277542457?h=8e0670869e&app_id=122963]
Uriel Orlow, *The Crown against Mafavuke*, 2016, Video sequence, Courtesy of the artist

The film shows us how plants became tools of colonial power and exposes the tactical move that makes this happen. As Mafavuke becomes metonymical for indigenous people and «The Crown» for colonial oppression, plants become symbols for a whole world view. And as Mafavuke and «The Crown» become agents within a politicized epistemological battle, plants were understood as agents within that battle. By arguing that the plants *by themselves naturally prove* its point, the prosecution treats them like agents for a political cause–agents

that take a certain side by their very own (alleged) nature. The tactical move is clear: By turning plants into witnesses they can be used like soldiers in a political battle.



Uriel Orlow, *The Crown against Mafavuke*, Videostill, Photo: Philipp Spillmann.

Casting the Ghosts of History

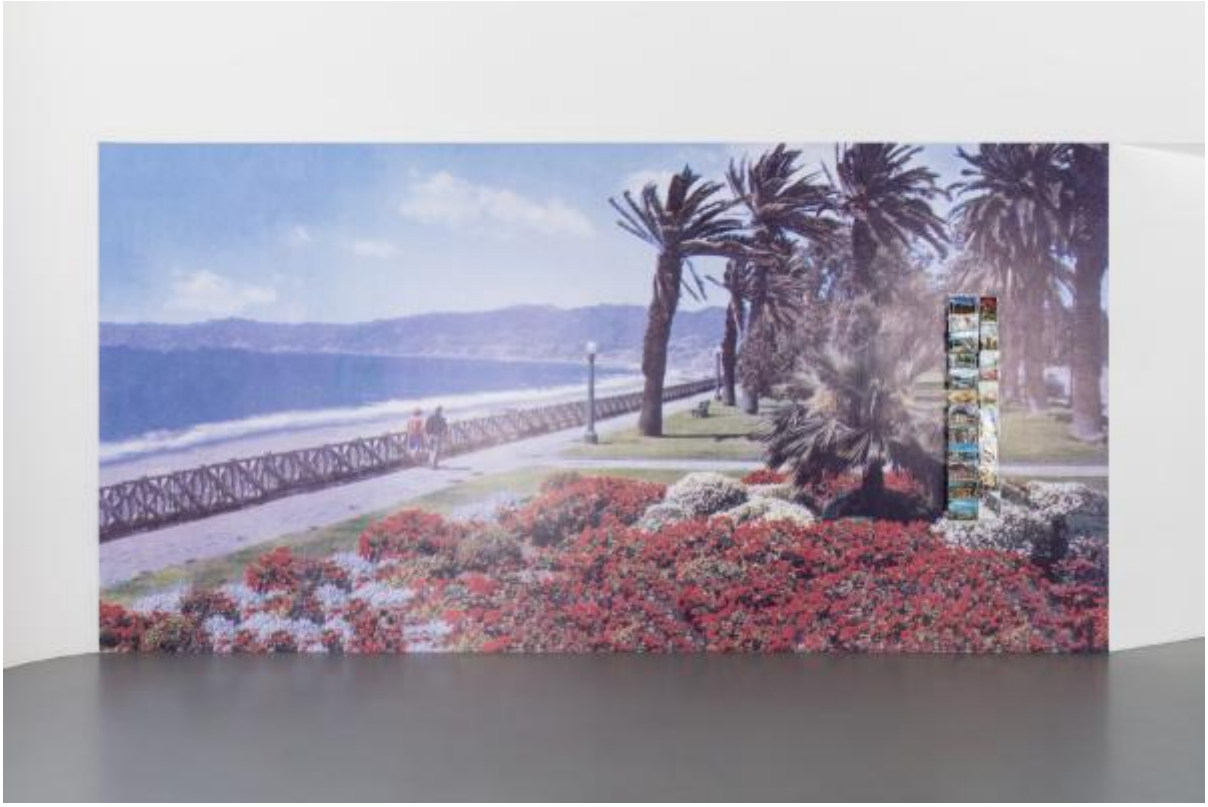
The Crown against Mafavuke is not only an attempt to decolonize nature by deconstructing the political ecology of colonial rulers. By re-enacting the trial, the film actually interferes in the making of such a politics. Several times we see the actors change their characters and even switch sides. Namely the prosecutor and the defense attorney are played by the same person. Thus, we don't see actors providing a body for the voices of people from the past. We see them playing a role with which they speak on their behalf. Neither Mafavuke nor «The Crown» are simply let speak. They are *made let speak*. They're not made present: instead their absence is brought into play. They appear as what Orlow once has described as ghosts. Ghosts do, as he writes, «not claim authenticity or truth: they provide neither an authentic image of history nor one of time …. Their historical index comes out of time, without being anchored in it …».[5] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b5] Ghosts are elusive, ever-recurring beings which occupy the place of the absent being by appearing as present absences. Their agency is to infest the representations with which the absent beings are acted out. In the play, we don't see the absent people embodied by actors. We see them embodied by roles and casted by actors.



Uriel Orlow, *The Crown against Mafavuke*, Videostill, Photo: Philipp Spillmann.

On the exact same level where actors jump between roles, plants appear as either attackers or defenders of a certain epistemology. These are their roles. Equally to the absent people, we never meet them as actual, living proofs of their nature. They never appear as pre-political, simply ‹natural› beings at all. We encounter them always already playing a role – always already political. They’re recurring, elusive beings that make other agents (attackers and defenders) speak on their behalf. It is precisely this move with which *The Crown against Mafavuke* turns around the political ecology of the colonial trial: As ghosts, plants consequently oppose any politicized naturalism that refers to their allegedly apolitical nature and thus transcend the very divide of nature and politics at its roots. They’re neither objects nor subjects but pretty much what Bruno Latour has defined as actors: «an entity that modifies another entity in a trial».[6] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b6]

Here, *The Crown against Mafavuke*, as a political theatre, builds a stage on which plants can perform the decolonization of their nature: As ghosts, they interrupt the agencies of the roles (attacking and defending) with which the political ecology of the colonial trial is deployed. On this level, they do not just deconstruct representations but infest, re-write, and re-organize them. The proposition of the film here is exactly to create a setting in which plants appear as agents who infiltrate and interrupt the logistics with which such rulers pretend to make plants speak.

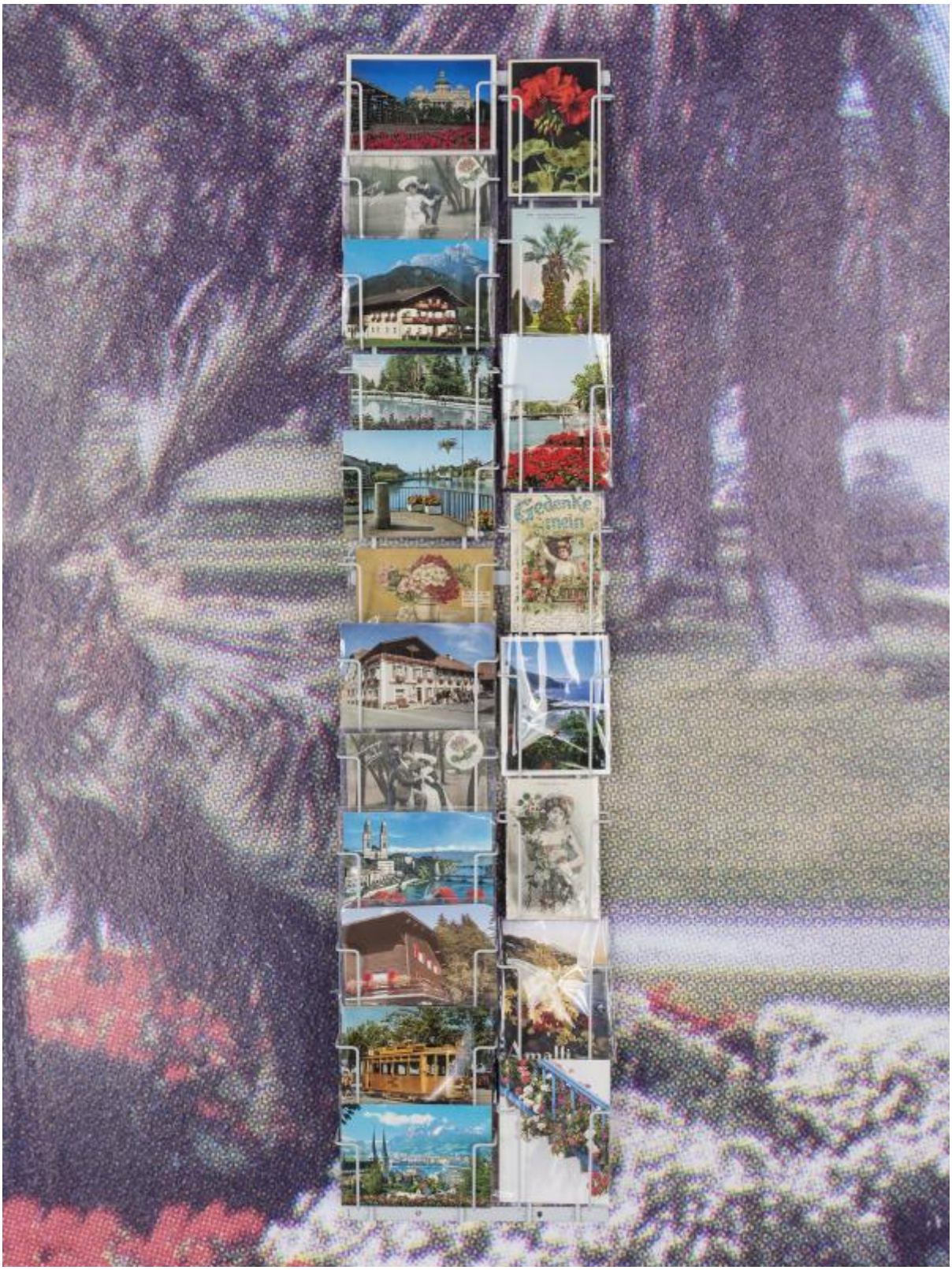


Uriel Orlow, *Geraniums are Never Red*, 2016, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris, Photo: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier

Spying on Double Agents

So, if *Theatrum Botanicum* displays plants as actors to intervene in a given political ecology, what political ecology does the project deploy itself? How are plants put into action as part of an artworks history- and nature-making agency? And how do they interact with us as viewers, listeners, and readers of the show?

Geraniums Are Never Red (2016) is exhibited in the entry hall, left to the entrance of the actual showroom. We see a large wallpaper showing an idyllic Riviera. One that looks like as if from a postcard (which it, in fact, is). Right next to the door, there's a rack containing a series of actual postcards, most of them from Switzerland. Everywhere, we see dreamy landscapes, appealing buildings, and charming little towns. And everywhere we see the same red flowers populating these places and inhabiting the memory-space which they create. According to the press release, they're not actually geraniums, but are named as such since they were imported to Europe from South Africa in the 17th century. While on the postcards the fake geraniums are represented as a botanical heritage of Switzerland's nature and history, we learn how they're actually accomplices within the making of a nature in which these flowers are purely natural inhabitants of the Swiss flora, and a history which is built on colonial amnesia. Thus, to us, the fake geraniums suddenly appear as double agents: in the same breath as they let make amnesia happen, they now let inform us about the way they do that. And in the same way they let geraniums appear as natural beings, they let us not see any geraniums anymore. In short: Their action is to radically interrupt the indexical connection of the document and the world as deployed by the document, and to replace it with a new network of connections between ghosts and those who cast them.



Uriel Orlow, *Geraniums are Never Red*, 2016, Detail, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris, Photo: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier

Here, the latter are not the postcards but *we as the implied viewers* of the artwork: the agents that collect the intel of the double-faced geraniums. The geraniums don't address us as people but as roles. And they change our role: The postcards addressed us as spectators that observe nature and history directly (as if they were binoculars) while they were actually being memory-making double agents. The fake geraniums turned that around. They address us as gazing and memory-making beings; as agencies that directly connect to other gaze- and memory-making agents. We become part of an arrangement that consists of an assembly of

both human and non-human actors.



Uriel Orlow, *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name*, seit 2015 (fortlaufend), Ausstellungsansicht; Echoes, 2018, Courtesy: der Künstler, La Veronica, Modica, and Mor Charpentier, Paris, Photo: Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, Gunnar Meier

Another such multi-actor-network can be found within the twist of the two works *Echoes* (2018) and *What Plants Were Called Before They Had a Name* (2015), as shown at Kunsthalle St. Gallen. The former is a five-channel sound installation that is played over five speakers which are placed in between six projections from the latter which are beamed on two opposing walls. On the speakers, we hear a series of jumping voices whispering names of various plants in several different indigenous languages.[7] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#b7] On the projections, we see the images of imprints of conserved plants. In short, we encounter two sorts of herbariums: a vocal and a visual one with the first conserving plants virtually and the second physically as material traces on projector foils. From the perspective of making nature, the artworks both let plants appear as radical absences. Moreover, the whole embodiment of the plants–voices and prints–is extremely fragile and fluid. If these arrangements are to be considered as collections, they do not consist of plants but of spells to cast their ghosts. They do not aim to make the absent speak but to record its silence. Here, the encounter comes into play: We're not brought into these arrangements as observers of the absent but as sensors that register the sounds and images of its vanishing presence.

And as such receiving and meaning-making agents, we become quite functional parts this arrangement's ecology: we occupy a position which links sounds and images, absence and presence, objects and agencies, excluded plants and the process of their representation. And we connect both these artworks to a spatial multisensory framework.



Uriel Orlow, *Grey, Green, Gold*, 2015-2017, Close-up, Courtesy of the artist



Uriel Orlow, *Wild Almond Tree, Cape Town*, from the series *The Memory of Trees*, 2016-2017, Courtesy of the artist

After the End of Nature

There is not one single actual, living and breeding plant to encounter in *Theatrum Botanicum*. Plants appear exclusively through their absence as actors, but they have the ability to alter the actual setting of the exhibition. On the other hand, the project appears itself as a plant-like agent: Like a rhizome, it entangles humans and non-human beings, both figuratively and literally, and strikes roots in both history and its making. If we consider *Theatrum Botanicum* literally a political theatre, it can be understood as an arena in which non-human beings (plants) and humans assemble through a variety of interfaces (artworks).

[1] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a1] See, e.g., Decolonizing Nature. Strategies for Conservation in a Postcolonial Era, edited by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, London 2003.
[2] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a2] T. J. Demos, Decolonizing Nature. Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology, Berlin 2016, p. 14.
[3] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a3] Refer to the press release of Kunsthalle St. Gallen.
[4] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a4] «Theatrum Botanicum», Official Website of Uriel Orlow, accessed May 28, 2018, https://urielorlow.net/project/theatrum-botanicum/
[5] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a5] Ghosts do, as he writes, «not claim authenticity or truth: they provide neither an authentic image of history nor one of time …. Their historical index comes out of time, without being anchored in it; they undermine history as progress, dismantle universal history, fracture the continuum of historicism». Uriel Orlow, «In Praise of Ghosts,» in: Vicissitudes. Histories and Destinies of Psychoanalysis, edited by Sharon Kivland and Naomi Segal, London 2012, pp. 263-269.
[6] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a6] «Actant is a term from semiotics covering both humans and nonhumans; an actor is any entity that modifies another entity in a trial; of actors it can only be said that they act; their competence is deduced from their performances; the action, in turn, is always recorded in the course of a trial and by an experimental protocol, elementary or not.» Bruno Latour, Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy, Cambridge 2004, p. 237.
[7] [/b-n-l/what-plants-were-called-before-they-had-a-name/pdf#a7] Listed are Khoi, SePedi, SeSotho, SiSwati, SeTswana, xiTsonga, isiXhosa, and isiZulu.

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