

The Routledge Companion to Biology in Art and Architecture

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Piper in the Woods

Men Becoming Trees¹

Kathy High

Upon reading the 1950s science fiction story by Philip K. Dick, *Piper in the Woods*, I was struck by the phenomenon of humans becoming plants at the center of Dick's plot. The story is set in the undefined future. It opens with a psychologist, Dr. Henry Harris, who is challenged with the task of diagnosing and curing a service member, Corporal Westerburg, who "thinks he is a plant." Corporal Westerburg had been serving at the new check station on Asteroid Y-3. But Westerburg was suddenly returned to his home base because he was not behaving "normally." He had stopped working altogether and was spending his days sitting outside in the sun, from dawn to dusk.

Harris tried to pry information out of Westerburg, asking him why he *thought* he was a plant. Westerburg simply answered the doctor: "Sir, I *am* a plant, I don't just *think* so. I've been a plant for several days, now."

Here is an excerpt of an exchange between Harris and Westerburg from the story itself:

Harris was silent for a while. At last he put his cigarette out and turned toward the youth. "All right, let's say you give up your job and sit in the sun. Well, what happens, then? Someone else has to do the job instead of you. Isn't that true? The job has to be done, your job has to be done. And if you don't do it someone else has to."

"I suppose so."

"Westerburg, suppose everyone felt the way you do? Suppose everyone wanted to sit in the sun all day? What would happen? No one would check ships coming from outer space. Bacteria and toxic crystals would enter the system and cause mass death and suffering. Isn't that right?"

"If everyone felt the way I do they wouldn't be going into outer space."

"But they have to. They have to trade, they have to get minerals and products and new plants."

"Why?"

"To keep society going."

"Why?"

"Well—" Harris gestured. "People couldn't live without society."

Westerburg said nothing to that. Harris watched him, but the youth did not answer.

"Isn't that right?" Harris said.

"Perhaps. It's a peculiar business, Doctor. You know, I struggled for years to get through Training. I had to work and pay my own way. Washed dishes, worked in kitchens. Studied at night, learned, crammed, worked on and on. And you know what I think, now?"

"I wish I'd become a plant earlier."2

From those conversations, Harris determined that Westerburg was overwhelmed by his responsibilities and perhaps intimidated by his own successes, and was having a kind of mental breakdown. Upon reporting this diagnosis to his supervisor, though, Harris was quickly advised that there were five more cases with the exact same symptoms being sent back to the home base planet for further evaluation.

Surprisingly, none of the service members would reveal how they became a plant. All simply stated that they were plants now. And they loved being plants, no regrets.

Finally, through hypnosis of one patient, Harris learned that the Piper in the Woods had something to do with the situation. He traveled to the Asteroid Y-3 to find this Piper. He met a kind of wood nymph who said she would take him to meet the Pipers. Upon his return to his home base planet, he proclaimed to his supervisor that he must return to Asteroid Y-3 for further research—he thought he was onto something. Harris then returned to his quarters, unpacked his suitcase from his trip. The suitcase was actually full of dirt that he spread on his cabin's floor, and, as the sun set, Harris lay down on the pile of dirt and slept ...

I returned to this Philip K. Dick story and wondered what it would take to "become a plant." I considered experiments such as Eduardo Kac's human DNA-infused flowers. In Kac's Natural History of the Enigma series, he created transgenic petunias that he called "plantimal, a new life form." The "'Edunia" was "a genetically engineered flower that is a hybrid" of Kac and the petunia.³ But I wanted to not just impose on a plant life, but become a plant life.

My attention turned to decomposition and decay as a means of potentially breaking down my life to become another. I studied composting projects that involved animal materials, not just plants, noting experiments with mortality composting using horses conducted by Cornell University's Waste Management Institute. Also, from reading Mary Roach's 2004 book Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers, I discovered some radical ways people have been composting human bodies. These include the practices of Swedish biologist Susanne Wiigh-Mäsak, who has a deep interest in rotting, mulching, and composting and founded the company Promessa Organic AB to promote natural burial practices. According to their website, "Promessa Organic AB is developing and offering a new method of laying the dead to rest. An environmentally friendly form of burial that takes full consideration of the biological realities to which a corpse is subjected."5

The process that Wiigh-Mäsak developed uses the natural compound liquid nitrogen. A corpse is submerged in liquid nitrogen to enable the separation of water from the body. The body is then further broken down into a powder through sonic vibration. "The dried particles are moved to a metal separation process: mercury, amalgam, sodium, metals and more than fifty other kinds of foreign substances can be removed from this process selectively."6 Then the remains of the body are buried in a shallow grave to become soil within about one year.

Wiigh-Mäsak notes: "The conceptual idea is to combine biological knowledge with a dignified and ethically correct way of being remembered by ones next of kin. The primary principles are preservation after death in organic form and shallow burial in living soil that quickly converts us to mulch." While death, decay, rotting, and composted soil all seem the root to becoming a plant, Promessa's processes appeared very energy dependent to me.

In 2014 I completed a video documentary, entitled *Death Down Under* (with Cynthia White), which looked at green burials, and the recycling of human bodies. I was inspired by one of the protagonists in the film, fashion designer Pia Interlandi, and her obsession with death. We were overlapping artists-in-residence at SymbioticA at the University of Western Australia, in the Human Anatomy and Biology Department, in 2009 and 2010. Pia always dressed *goth*, hosting pale white skin and only ever wearing black. She also gave lectures about the history of death rituals and promoted a "cradle to grave" or "womb to tomb" philosophy, considering the consequences of our deaths as much as our lives. My friends and family had always referred to me as "morbid." My concerns with mortality developed early on from caring for various pets and animals through their deaths, and from being by the side of each of my parents as they passed away. I embraced the processes of death—and made them transparent—something that is not really practiced in the United States. Thus, I was drawn to Pia's project and how it made death and the breakdown of a body very tangible.

Death Down Under followed the collaboration of Interlandi and forensic scientist Dr. Ian Dadour of the University of Western Australia. An experimental research project was created between them, allowing Pia to test out her fashion-for-the-dead, and Ian, an entomologist studying homicide, to research clothing decayed on dead animal victims. Pia and Ian amassed a team of helpers to wash, dress and bury twenty-one dead pigs on a kangaroo reserve. They then dug up the remains to examine the decay of the ritual burial garments over a year's time. Death Down Under followed the entire process from gathering the slaughtered pigs to the results in the laboratory. This video looked at our care for the dead—be they human or non-human—and at ideas of green burials and the ecology of death.

The most difficult part of the film process was witnessing the unearthing of the pig bodies. The process of decay was strangely unnerving, even though I am one who is supposedly not disturbed by "gore." But I realized that we don't witness this breakdown of flesh very often, except for animals found dead on the road, and such. I also saw this decay process was key to the idea



Figure 29.1 An old dog friend, Lily, is laid to rest in the video *Lily Does Derrida:* A *Dog's Video Essay*, in which Lily ponders Jacques Derrida's writings about animal consciousness and subjectivity

Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2010.



Figure 29.2 Kathy High, Mr. Fox, 2012. Living in a rural area allows one to witness the seasonal road kills

Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2012.

of becoming a plant. Decomposing bodies, compost, were the basis of good plant life. Natural burials seemed the way to go.

In the film there are some moments when Pia, fashion designer/protagonist, handles the decaying pig bodies as they are dug up from their gravesites. Twenty-one pig bodies were exhumed, three at a time, every fifty days over one year. Pigs are often used in research because of their physiological similarities to humans. They were used in this experiment as a substitute for human bodies. At the dig that occurred on day 150, Interlandi showed the camera some material that she had a hard time distinguishing as "fabric or pigskin:"

Where it gets difficult is you actually peel off things like this which is actually pigskin and you're not sure quite what's skin and what's fabric. And I might have to take that back, that is actually ... but it is actually fabric under there. It's just got so much hair and skin attached to it. I might have to take that back again. I think that that is ... that's actually skin with a bit of fabric, or a bit of tendon. No, that's tendon.

Interlandi's confusion is palpable. Her quandary is how to distinguish this dissolving life form from the material that wrapped the bodies. With hands deep in rotting flesh, she went on to say, "I really feel like I have interrupted something that you are not actually meant to see." The process of decomposition is amazingly laid bare in this experiment. We don't usually



Figure 29.3 Pia Interlandi carrying dead pig from video Death Down Under, by Kathy High and Cynthia White

Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2010.

engage so physically with this process. It is gross, appallingly visceral and nasty—but it is also mesmerizing, revealing, and perhaps has a touch of Victorian morbid fascination with death's lurid details.

More typically in contemporary Western culture when considering deceased kin, a preserved body is desired, or one that is cremated. The thought of decomposing flesh, a process that occurs with green burials, sickens many people, perhaps harking back to Christian beliefs in a second coming where bodies must remain whole to rise up to meet their maker. This fear of decay is coupled with a fear of death and denial that death is a necessary part of life's cycle.

As Philippe Ariés states in his book *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes towards Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, attitudes towards death shifted in the late nineteenth century, when funeral directors took over from ministers. At this point, "Nothing sad could be associated with death," writes Ariés, and luxurious coffins replaced crypts and mausoleums."

While various preservation techniques have been practiced with dead human bodies since the Egyptians' mummification, starting in the mid-nineteenth century embalming with formaldehyde has been used as a common and growing practice in the United States as a way to transport and also honor the dead. Embalming with formaldehyde was promoted extensively during the US Civil War (1861–1865) as a means of preserving soldiers' bodies to ship them home to their families, who "no longer accepted collective burial on the battlefield. It was said that a certain Thomas Holmes embalmed 4,028 soldiers in four years at one hundred dollars per body." Thus, in the 1800s, we moved into an era of the "invisible death" where death "became

medicalized." And as soldiers died away from home, beautifully preserved dead bodies were presented to their relatives at their funerals. Decay was rarely witnessed.

Now perhaps the trend is shifting, as many people research new ecological methods of disposing of human corpses. Embalming bodies and handling formaldehyde, a known human carcinogen, is dangerous. Even cremations release huge amounts of pollutants into the air, such as mercury from dental work, as well as other heavy metals and toxins. Moreover, incineration technology uses a lot of fossil fuel. Ecologically we cannot keep going like this with our death industry. Why not endorse natural burials, throwing a body directly into a shallow grave, as a viable alternative? Interlandi commented on the ecological benefits of natural burials in *Death Down Under*:

A typical grave is lined with cement and housed by a wooden or even metal coffin. The body inside is embalmed with formaldehyde so instead of providing a nutrient rich gift to the earth, we're instead providing a poisonous one. A traditional graveyard filled with tombstones and crypts is a huge waste of resources and locks up the nutrients in our bodies that could otherwise be recycled into the earth. If instead we were to bury a body in a shallow grave, wrapped in a simple shroud it would allow the nutrients within the body to provide nourishment for plant life and other organisms, essentially enabling a reciprocation between the body and the earth through the natural process of decomposition. And simply let nature take its course. ¹¹

This romantic rhetoric of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is adopted by green burial advocates and environmentalists, countering the polluting practices of standard burials. The website for Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve provides astonishing statistics about US burial and cemetery practices: "On average, a cemetery buries 1,000 gallons of embalming fluid, 97.5 tons of steel, 2,028 tons of concrete, and 56,250 board feet of high quality tropical hardwood in just one acre of land." Even cremations have a serious ecological cost: "Each cremation releases between 0.8 and 5.9 grams of mercury as bodies are burned. This amounts to between 1,000 and 7,800 pounds of mercury released each year in the U.S. 75 percent goes into the air and the rest settles into the ground and water."

Moving away from this isolationist method of disposing of human corpses, I would rather think about the literal dissolution of a body, a transformation into another. The notion of "becoming" seems more appealing furthering a breakdown and rebuilding of life. Not only could my body 'become' plant, but my body's microbiomes will share in the web of soil and plant micro-organisms and become nutrients. After all, we are all part of extensive networks of micro-organisms. Biologists Scott Gilbert and Jan Sapp, along with philosopher Alfred Tauber write of new ways to think about these networks and human "individuality":

Thus, animals can no longer be considered individuals in any sense of classical biology: anatomical, developmental, physiological, immunological, genetic, or evolutionary. Our bodies must be understood as holobionts whose anatomical, physiological, immunological, and developmental functions evolved in shared relationships of different species. Thus, the holobiont, with its integrated community of species, becomes a unit of natural selection whose evolutionary mechanisms suggest complexity hitherto largely unexplored. 14

Gilbert et al refer to us as islands ready for colonization by bacteria, "holobionts" joined and evolving with bacteria, yeast, fungi in a symbiosis connectedness that keeps us alive, metabolizing food, building new cells in systems of constant relatedness as we host each other. With the burgeoning interest in human microbial ecologies, we can no longer think of ourselves as 'individuals' or as Gilbert states: "Although the adage 'no man is an island' works for human interactions, each person is precisely an island to a bacterial cell."

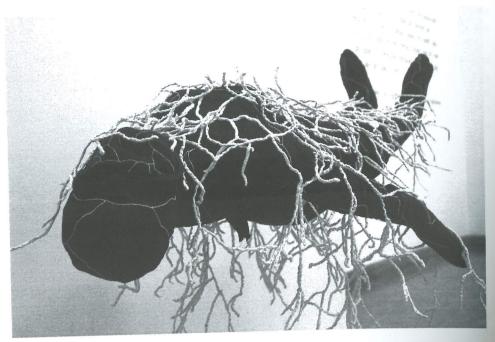


Figure 29.4 Suspended model wearing Infinity Burial Suit by artist/designer Jae Rhim Lee

Artist/designer Jae Rhim Lee has also been working with death and decomposition, developing a mushroom-based burial suit in her "Infinity Burial Project." Lee's newly-formed company website, Coeio, states: "Join us in creating a better way to leave the earth... We like the idea of facilitating the decomposition, so that our bodies can be part of the earth as soon as possible. We also like the idea that we can be productive and help solve our environmental crisis—even after we die." 16

Lee is promoting various techniques and tools for "death acceptance"—a concept that is key here. Looking at many of the same principles of natural burials, Lee is keenly interested in asking the public to embrace "the practice of decompiculture (the cultivation of decomposing organisms)." She even developed an iPad app called *Decomp Me*,¹⁷ where you can upload a picture of your face and watch it decompose and be devoured by mushrooms—Lee's means of toxic free "decomp."

Lee researched the toxins that human bodies carry and created an Infinity Burial Suit as an art project—that is now being produced and marketed—a body suit "embroidered with a special type of thread infused with mushroom spores. When buried, the mushroom spores act to cleanse the body of many toxins and gently return it to the earth." These unique mushrooms act as "decomposition activators." I have been inspired by both Lee and Interlandi's artistic research—which have lead to my work, *The Resurrection Project*.

To begin *The Resurrection Project*, on June 30, 2013 I purchased a plot of land for my own natural burial at Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, a cemetery preserve outside Ithaca, New York. As described on their website, "Greensprings covers 130 acres of rolling meadows, spotted with evergreen groves, fringed by 10 acres of woods, and surrounded by 8,000 acres of protected forests." A resort for the dead! It is a beautiful site.

When I made a visit to Greensprings, they said their prices were going to go up soon, so I immediately purchased a 5-meter-by-5-meter plot (their standard size for each body). I will be

located in the lot in the I section (West Meadow), plot number C6, site number 15. In a fork of paths that sprawl around the meadow and wooded area of the site, I-C6-15, my plot, is shaded by a white pine tree indigenous to the area so it will not be cut down. The tree and I shook hands in greeting ... From their website: "We facilitate a variety of conservation measures to protect the natural cemetery preserve and restore native flora and fauna. Stewardship is at the heart of everything we do at Greensprings." ²⁰

There is much green burial rhetoric on their website about sustainable practices and renewing the earth such as "Your choice for natural burial is a choice for natural renewal and growth—a way to give back to the earth that sustains us all. Save a forest ... plant yourself!" The stewards of Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve want to return their land to its original state, so they allow only plantings that are indigenous to the area, native plants. As such, they provide lists of plants that are permitted to be planted on people's graves approximately a year after interment. By then the ground will have settled and the body's decomposition will be well underway. An idea for *The Resurrection Project* came from my initial visit to Greensprings, when I walked around the grounds. It was late June, and every 5 meters, where people had been buried, there was a 1 meter × 2 meter rectangle of densely growing ox-eye daisies (the first perennial that colonizes new grave mounds). Their bodies had become natural resources. In other words, the bodies were literally "pushing up daisies"!

For The Resurrection Project I decided to make a living "renewal garden" with a circled design of plants to overlook my gravesite. These plants have been chosen based on their common name and the poetry (or irony) of those names, as opposed to the qualities of the plants themselves. So, for example, the innermost part of the circle will include perennials such as Turtlehead (Chelone glabra), Sneezeweed (Helenium autumnale), and False Sunflower (Heliopsis helianthoides). The next circle of plants will include grasses and rushes named Switch Grass (Panicum virgatum), Sweet Grass (Hierochloe odorata), and Soft Rush (Juncus effusus). The next outer ring will be the ferns, made up of Sensitive Ferns (Onoclea sensibilis). And finally the outside ring will include the vine Virgin's Bower (Clematis virginiana). These plants: Turtlehead, Sneezeweed, False Sunflower, Switch Grass, Sweet Grass, Soft Rush, Sensitive Ferns and Virgin's Bower, among others, will make up my "headstone" and grave marker—making up a kind of plant poem representing different aspects of my life—from the coy to the innocent, the intuitive to the jaded. I will continue to include other indigenous plants to fill in other aspects of my personality, researching the plants' various properties, such as medicinal, hyper-accumulating, nitrogen fixers, and more.

To date, I have been experimenting with test plantings. To provide nutrition for the plants, I have placed animal carcasses under the flora—all dead birds and rodents brought to me by my cats. As the carcasses decay, the flowers grow, and organisms in the soil and in the plants' roots intermingle in constant process of symbiosis—things eating things, exchanging, becoming.

The Resurrection Project continues to develop specifically designed gardens for my burial site and others, and encourages green burials, becoming plants, and—as Jae Rhim Lee describes it—encourages "death acceptance." As my friend artist Oliver Kellhammer has taught me, even brownfields, "dead" zones comprised of industrial waste sites, can become biodiverse and thriving with life as the actual processes of decomposition and rejuvenation are at work. From death there is life. I will eventually make "renewal gardens" design plans available to others as post-human plant portraits. I intend to research the actual micro organisms of the decay and map the communities of cells that exist at a burial site. I will ask my family to plant my garden after my death, as my death mask, if you will, and document its progress—a testament to the process of change, of transformation, of afterlife.

I return to Gilbert et al's discussion of symbionts and systems of engagement from the conclusion of their article: "For animals, as well as plants, there have never been individuals. This new



Figure 29.5a Artist Kathy High planting first renewal garden test for *The Resurrection Project* Source: Photograph, Shannon Johnson, 2014.



Figure 29.5b Dead bird with planting for renewal garden, *The Resurrection Project* Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2014.

paradigm for biology asks new questions and seeks new relationships among the different living entities on Earth. We are all lichens."²²

We all live in a world of symbiotic relations between various microbes that will continue to evolve in life—and even in our death. Once people embrace the utter complexity of our lives, and the micro organisms that make it happen, they will appreciate becoming a plant. We are, in fact, already many life forms ... Remembering Harris, the doctor in Piper in the Woods, ... as the sur set, he lay down on the pile of dirt and slept ... with no regrets.



Figure 29.6 Dead birds brought in by cats and used for planting, *The Resurrection Project* Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2014.



Figure 29.7 Kathy High, from the Exquisite Corpse: Cat Carnage photograph series, 2012 Source: Photograph, Kathy High, 2012.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was first delivered as part of the "Vegetal Sensoria" panel organized by Dr. Monika Bakke at the "Mutamorphosis" conference in Prague, Czech Republic, 2012.
- 2 Philip Dick, Piper in the Woods (Mississippi: Gutenberg Ebook, 2010), www.gutenberg.org/files/ 32832/32832-h/32832-h.htm. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 3 Eduardo Kac, "Natural History of the Enigma," www.ekac.org/nat.hist.enig.html. Accessed January 3. 2016.
- 4 Cornell Waste Institute, "Mortality," http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/mortality.htm. Accessed January 3,
- 5 Susanne Wiigh-Mäsak, "Promessa Home Page," www.promessa.se/. Accessed January 1, 2016.
- 6 Susanne Wiigh-Mäsak, "How It Works," www.promessa.se/about-life-death/. Accessed 3 January 2016.
- 7 Wiigh-Mäsak, "Promessa Home Page."
- 8 Kathy High, Death Down Under video, https://vimeo.com/50529889. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 9 Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes towards Death over the Last One Thousand Years (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 596-597.
- 10 Ibid., 597.
- 11 High, Death Down Under.
- 12 Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, "Why Choose Green Burial," www.naturalburial.org/ why-choose-green-burial/. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 14 Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, "A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals." Quarterly Review of Biology 87, 4 (December 2012): 334. Ibid, 334–335.
- 15 Gilbert et al, 334-335.
- 16 Coeio, "Frequently Asked Questions," www.coeio.com/faqs/#toggle-id-11. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 17 Zero One Biennial, "Infinity Burial Project: Decomp Me," http://2012.zero1biennial.org/jae-rhim-lee. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 18 Coeio, "Frequently Asked Questions."
- 19 Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, "What We Do," www.naturalburial.org/what-we-do/. Accessed January 3, 2016.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, "Why Choose Green Burial."
- 22 Gilbert, "A Symbiotic View of Life," 336.

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