

RACHAEL CHAMPION

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Fig. 1. Rachael Champion, 'Raze Bloom'. 2015. Hales Gallery. From: Hales Gallery

Grassy turf strips are separated with stripes of gravel, and rubber mulch, creating a garden centre meets zebra crossing type floor. Perched on top of this base are pebble dashed, grass topped containers holding plastic bags filled with water and a salad of aquatic plants, the bags hang down like a full udder between aluminium scaffolding legs. (Fig. 1) This garden is in a windowless white gallery,¹ and is being kept alive by full spectrum lights above, and noisy aeration devices bubbling away in the bags below. It is an art work by Rachael Champion entitled *Raze Bloom* (2015). The press release for this work quotes the 'Anthropocene',² the idea that humans are making noticeable changes to the ecology and geology of the earth. Exactly how this piece responds to the relationship between humans and nature can be analysed through the writings of Hannah Arendt.

Political Philosopher Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition* (1958), critically analysis what it means to be *vita activa*, an active participant in the world. Integral to this term are the three categories: labor, work and action, which relate

to the conditions in which man lives on earth.³ Focus here is upon the category of work, in which she addresses the things made by humans and our relationship with the earth. According to Arendt, the earth's conditions determine who we are, 'Men are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence',⁴ and equally we have conditioned the earth into an almost entirely man-made construction. Therefore the planet we live on, the earth, and the world we have created, human artifice, are crucially important to the way we live our lives. By using Champions work we are able to see how Arendt's theories are just as relevant today, almost 60 years after she wrote it, and how the issues she raised are being dealt with by artists today.

Durability in the Human World

A condition of the earth is that man-made things, when unused, decay into the natural life process because they are at the mercy of natural forces; this process gives the human

world instability. According to Arendt, human life is dependent on the durability of our constructed civilization to give us stability. Our world, we know, will outlast our short lives, just as it was here before we were born. It gives us a stable setting for us to live free from the changeability of nature. Moreover, it gives us an outlet for individuality in a world of many people, without which we would be like sheep in a field, just another member of a species.⁵ It is durability which is necessary to human existence, the ability to relate to the same things day after day gives us a sense of identity and place in a world that we cannot ultimately control.

This durability must be sustained by a constant remaking of our environment; this depends upon man using the natural world as a material for construction. Through using nature as a medium in the form of aquatic plants, grass and soil, Champion articulates this relationship. She is acting as homo faber and viewing natural materials to be as valuable as 'the work performed upon them',⁶ they are a means to an end. *Raze Bloom* combines natural materials with man-made construction materials, like pebble dash, scaffolding poles and plastic bags, suggesting a lack of hierarchy - the plants do require extra equipment in order to keep them alive, however this seems more like a stipulation of using them as a material rather than as hailing them as superior. The use of pebble dash in particular highlights this lack of discrimination between materials as it is seen as a cheap building material despite coming from a non-renewable resource.

The use of materials as a means to an end is problematic for Arendt, as it puts into question the meaningfulness of our world. By using violence and destruction to procure materials from the natural world, we have decided that the end justifies the means⁷ and that it is worth destroying nature for the sake of its materials. All of nature is judged in terms of how appropriate something is for a specific use, and the object created from this process is equally judged by how useful it is to us. For Arendt, 'If man is the "measure of all things" then not only nature, treated by homo faber as the most "worthless material" upon which to work, but the "valuable" things themselves have become mere means, losing their own intrinsic "value"'.⁸ The necessity to create a stable human world has therefore rendered it meaningless. Champion's press release states that her work is a 'commentary on our contrived engagement with nature in our built environments',⁹ suggesting that she, like Arendt, intends to criticise our relationship with nature. The title of Champion's work, *Raze Bloom*, is also to be read as critical as it references the 'razing' of areas of nature and existing infrastructure to make way for more construction.

Homo faber's ability to make solid, durable objects through work is a process of 'reification';¹⁰ it is the 'transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things'.¹¹ For example, without ideas being written into books they are not tangible, once they are reified they become worldly. The ultimate

form of reification is art, in which 'human feelings and natural materials, both of them living and perpetually changing are miraculously transfigured into permanent forms that take on a public existence and withstand the passage of time and morality'.¹² *Raze Bloom* is difficult to align with the idea of durability; according to Arendt, art has permanence, however, this work is made of perishable materials. The physical permanence of this work relies on keeping the lights and aerators running, so presumably at the end of the exhibition the work was destroyed, much like the process of construction the work is initially referencing. Therefore we can deduce that permanence in a cultural context must mean more than just physical survival, Margaret Canovan suggests Arendt means 'objects that are fit to survive and be passed on to future generations'.¹³ In the case of *Raze Bloom*, we can assume that despite its inability to survive physically its documentation and ability to be remade will create a form of permanence. *Raze Bloom*, therefore, conceptually questions durability through its associations with the constant redevelopment of the human world, as well as in the very nature of it as an impermanent artwork.

Nature in the Modern World

Durability, as a human condition creates the necessity to build one's own space in the world as shelter from others and to assert one's own individuality. However in order to create this place and to use materials from the natural world he must first destroy its natural processes. Therefore inherent in all creations of homo faber is violence and destruction; this gives him a sense of strength and ownership of nature providing man with 'self-assurance and satisfaction, and can even become a source of self-confidence throughout life'.¹⁴ This emotional response gives man a feeling of Godliness, to be able to destroy and create his own world gives a feeling of power, 'homo faber conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth'.¹⁵ This desire to have one's own place on the earth is similar to the phenomenon of creating a garden. By using natural materials like plants, *Raze Bloom* can be also compared to gardening, in which the gardener controls the growth process for a specific purpose. Following the garden theorist Thomas Whately's 1770 definition of a garden as: 'no longer confined to the spots from which it borrows its name, but regulates also the dispositions and embellishments of a park, farm or a riding',¹⁶ it is possible to assume that any form of civilised nature, be it landscape architecture or agricultural land, can be considered a garden. Therefore *Raze Bloom* is a garden and a work of art simultaneously.

However, *Raze Bloom* highlights a difficulty in defining gardening in terms of Hannah Arendt's theory of the *vita activa*, it is not necessary for the continuation of life and therefore cannot be considered labor (as agriculture can), nor does it contain the necessary permanence that work provides, nor can it be considered action as it is not something that

happens between humans in public. The fact that a garden is not at home in Arendt's categorisations, and nor is the work of Champion is striking, and suggests that there is a space in between nature and the artificial world which can be filled by a garden, with a feeling of closeness to nature despite being aware of how far from it a garden truly is.¹⁷ There is some human need not met by either realm that a garden can provide, in the opinion of Robert Pogue Harrison this is a 'sanctuary of repose', which is made possible by 'the structuring of one's relation to one's environment'.¹⁸ He goes on to quote the condition of 'biophilia'¹⁹ as a reason for creating gardens, this is the pleasure gained from life, specifically non-human life, and shows the therapeutic properties contact with nature can bring to people healing properties. Perhaps also *Raze Bloom* provides a window into the benefits of nature in an urban and man-made setting.

However, as suggested previously, the human relationship with nature is difficult; Arendt's opinion of scientific achievement and its domination over our lives must be examined. Firstly, our ability to perceive the world from a different perspective has led to a 'decisive shrinkage'²⁰ in our minds of the earth; this has led to a widening distance or 'alienation'²¹ between us and our surroundings. This has been caused by the accessibility of the aviation industry and space travel, illustrated by Tim Peake recently attempting to call his parents from space.²² Secondly, scientists now have the ability to recreate natural phenomenon found outside of the earth, on the earth- namely nuclear fusion. For scientific experimentation such as this we rely on instruments created by man, therefore we rely completely upon human creation in order to learn these things, Arendt warns,

'we deal only with the patterns of our own mind, the mind which designed the instruments and put nature under its conditions in the experiment [...] so that wherever we search for that which we are not, we encounter only the patterns of our minds'.

Therefore our process of learning is just a reiteration of our own man-made world.²³ In this way *Raze Bloom* is also an 'experiment', it is a repackaging of human artifice with the intention of learning about it.

Pseudo-Nature

It is unclear as to whether *Raze Bloom* is critical of the human relationship with nature, in its press release the relationship is described as 'contrived', however the work could equally be viewed as a celebration of the benefits of nature in an urban setting. Arendt's own opinion of this relationship is difficult, she concedes that living in a human-made world is a necessary condition for human existence, but criticises it as 'meaningless', 'she simultaneously values artificiality and condemns modernity'.²⁴ This can be read as a respect and

acknowledgement of the importance of civilization, with a mistrust of modernity's relationship with nature. Canovan describes our version of nature as 'pseudo-nature to which the genuine human world has been sacrificed'.²⁵ This is predominantly in relation to the experimentation and recreation of natural processes that have replaced natural ones, which seems to be accelerating to an uncertain end, 'what they are left with is themselves and a pseudo-nature of their own devising- in other words the combination of loneliness with slavery to inhuman "laws"'.²⁶ Therefore, although Champion's intentions in criticism of the human relationship with nature is not immediately clear, if we judge it by the standards of Arendt then, because of the replacement of natural processes seen in *Raze Bloom*, we can consider it to be a form of pseudo-nature.

By viewing Rachael Champion's work through Arendt's lens we can see that *Raze Bloom* deals with the conditions of being a human in the world, and specifically what it means to be a human in light of a modern scientific approach to nature. The necessity of durability and constant making to stabilise a planet in a state of flux, in combination with making a stage for individuality to be possible, are conditions of being human on earth. By recognising this we can assess the relationship of humans with the planet. The pseudo-nature of *Raze Bloom*, then can be seen as both a celebration and a condemnation of this relationship, it could also simply be a demonstration of it. Arendt deems this relationship as being problematic due to the continuation of spiralling scientific progress, leading to an uncertain end. We can read *Raze Bloom* as a premonition of a future in which all natural process have been replaced with man-made versions, and although this can still be seen as a beautiful garden, it also has a darker undertone.

The underlying moral of Arendt's theory is that whilst needing to recognise our earthly conditions that bind us to life, we can also be thankful that we are humans as a plural and that with new life comes new beginnings and new possibilities for life on the earth, she describes this as 'the miracle that saves the world',²⁷ we are not resigned to our current state of things. To consider *Raze Bloom* in light of this hopefulness, gives it an altogether more optimistic quality.

1 Rachael Champion|Agnes Denes|Rachel Pimm, Hales Gallery, Tea Building, 7 Bethnal Green Road, London, E1 6LA.

2 Paul J. Crutzen, Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene"', The IGBP Newsletter, no. 41 (May 2000), <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/NL41.pdf>, 17.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.

4 Ibid, 9.

5 Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt, *A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1995), 106.

6 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 135.

7 Ibid, 153.

8 Ibid, 155.

9 Rachael Champion|Agnes Denes |Rachel Pimm (press release), Hales Gallery.

- http://www.halesgallery.com/exhibitions/86/installation_shots/
10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 95.
11 Ibid, 95.
12 Canovan, Hannah Arendt, (1995), 128.
13 Ibid, 109.
14 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 140.
15 Ibid, 139.
16 Patrick Eyres, Fiona Russell, 'Preface and Acknowledgments' in *Sculpture and the Garden* (eds.) Patrick Eyres and Fiona Russell (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006) 13.
17 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 41.
18 Ibid, 43.
19 Ibid, 44.
20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 251.
21 Ibid, 248.
22 ITN, "Astronaut Tim Peake calls parents from space... but gets the answerphone", *The Guardian*, 22/12/15.. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/video/2015/dec/22/astronaut-tim-peake-calls-parents-from-space-gets-the-answerphone-video>
23 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 286 – 287.
24 Canovan, Hannah Arendt, (1995), 109.
25 Ibid, 110.
26 Ibid, 150.
27 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998), 247.

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Exhibitions

Rachael Champion|Agnes Denes|Rachel Pimm, Hales Gallery. Tea Building, 7 Bethnal green Road, London, E1 6LA. Visited 25/11/15.