

A LESSON IN UN- SPOKEN VERBS

Frederike Doffin's informal sharing of her ongoing garden-based research on the 'relational practices of bodies and land' offers a deep container for calm. Parvathi Ramanathan recalls that morning from the late summer of 2022 at a garden in Britz.

'Berg wandern' and 'bummeln' were among the first few verbs that I learnt in my Deutschkurs A1. They revealed to me very important aspects of German culture – an adoration for nature and relaxed strolls. However, these verbs – experiences of the body in relation to land and space – appear to be bound to the great outdoors, with an emphasis on the 'great'. This appears to make sense at a time when economics is all about scaling up and life demands to be spectacular. Then, it also appears to make sense, that in this leisurely activity of 'bummeln', the gaze wanders away into distant vastness.

However, in Frederike Doffin's 'relational practices of bodies and land', I am reminded to bring my gaze closer and shown that this too can be spectacular. The artist's sharing of her garden practice brings attention to the minute and magnificent intimacies within our ecology. Keeping to the spirit of relaxed wandering in nature, we meet as a small group in a garden in Berlin-Britz.



Tuning in to the pounding potatoes underneath, the ascending Maize and Bean plants whispering into the cobs, we did make time for human conversation

Right at the outset, Doffin creates a calm and grounded atmosphere for the gathering. Her gentle voice invites us to soften our eyes to meet what we see with an inquisitive spirit. This is how she seems to see this garden that she cares for along with a collective, “What are you trying to say? And what will you be?”, she seems to ask the plants. Now in the late August summer of Europe, the plants are in different states of bloom and passing. The frequent heat waves this summer have not been easy on them, Doffin shares. She draws our attention to one tree in particular – a tall Larch conifer – and informs us that it gradually appears to be letting go of life. Not because of lack of care, but rather because there was a dearth of the natural resources that sustain it. “One can’t be sure”, Doffin says, “I learned that trees are communal beings and in times of lack of water, or when the roots cannot reach deeper, maybe because there is a house or other barriers, some trees, especially older ones let go, so that the whole community can strive and has enough water.” We now look at this tree with renewed wonder: a reminder of the generosity and love that is embedded in nature. Doffin points out the signs that indicate this stage of the transitioning tree. It is a moment of mourning but also one of hope. Bringing us closer to the old tree, she shows us 5-6 younger coniferous trees that surround the first one. We notice their fresh supple branches and bright green pine needles.



Lying underneath the mother tree, I don't remember the sensation of her skin, but I remember the comfort of the hug we shared.

Doffin then shares a hint of her relational practice with land in this cosy nook. She invites us to lie down around the tree, tuning into the channel that flows down from the mother tree to the younger ones – connected by the shared earth underneath them. Her gentle facilitation evokes an awareness of our own bodies in this process, finding synergy between the inner self and mute giant upon whose roots we lay. She makes us aware of the high canopy of the mother tree, bringing us to sense it with our closed eyes. Sensorial responses through colours, words and sounds are welcomed in this held space. Through her considered presence, Doffin creates a container for contemplation about the onset of demise. Importantly though, she also transforms it into an awareness of the nourishing wisdom of every living being, including ourselves and the flora around us.

With this beginning, 'relational practices of bodies and land' brings me an acute awareness of the infinite life teeming around me. On this dry summer noon, as I sauntered around the collective garden, the millions of minute seeds therein become much more significant. We are invited to explore alone with curiosity and with a keen connection to our senses, to observe colours, textures, taste them if we feel inclined to. The natural landscaping and paths within the garden open up some routes, but the various stops designed by Doffin also opens up new paths. The sharing of her practice in each stop guides the gaze of the untrained eye. As though in search of Easter eggs, we crawl in behind tall hazelnut bushes to find messages leading to another plant. There in a hedge is a shoebox full of little banks of seeds, already collected. Have you ever seen a moringa seed? On another site I watch the bright purple of a single Mallow flower staining the bowl of water it floats in. The raspberries have notes from some bad days and next to it is the plum tree with shining reflections from a better day. I pull on a rope that leads me to another precious little nook. I find a book that journals Doffin's days as well as that of the garden's plants. Every day seems to be one of discovery here – flowers, leaves, seeds and fruits constantly being a reason for wonders and ponders.



Singing to the tune of Fascia-skeleton : Old Garden Raddish found in the early year after the last snow

Tea made with herbs I plucked myself, warms my belly. The leaves in the cabbage patch at the far corner of the garden have the strangest colours. I touch them in wonder. Someone finds a seed that is sheathed with another natural protection – it reminds them of a Stork's long curved bill. Others are taken by the musical rustling sounds of mustard seeds inside their natural sheaths. We have a large collection of them that we can uncover for further seed storage at the 'mustard meditation' corner. I don't mind the tiny hair that sting my thumbs as I peel them. It becomes another way of being in mindful contact with another living being. It may grow roots one day and I may walk around free, but we can sense one another in our relationship with land. Frederike Doffin's knowledge of the plants through her research along with her own somatic sensibility, is transmitted as a warm soothing experience in 'relational practices of bodies and land'. Something that is deeply personal and inculcated over seasons and years, becomes somehow possible to lean into for a few hours. Her sharing allows for a deep engagement that is solitary, but also suitably cared for and contained. In the end, it is also a collective experience when we gather again to share a glimpse of what resonated with us. What is shared there deserves to remain there – with the plants, with the land or in a letter dropped left at the ageing tree. So I will not say more. Perhaps all that is left to be said is that Doffin's sharing reminds me of a word that I did not learn through any official sources in my German language course. But I sensed it then. A shared sense of flow. 'sinnezusammenhängen'



sinnezusammenhängen: visitors to the Goutweed flowers and evening primrose