

# ***Infinite Silences***

**Amanda White**



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**October 14 to November 25, 2017**

**Essay by Jacqueline Bell**

**Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre**

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**Gallery Hours**

Tuesday-Saturday, 12-5 pm

[www.modernfuel.org](http://www.modernfuel.org)

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**Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre** is a non-profit organization facilitating the presentation, interpretation, and production of contemporary visual, time based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation, and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences. As an advocate for contemporary art, as well as for artists' rights, we pay professional fees to artists in accordance with the CARFAC fee schedule.



## ***Infinite Silences***

Biological barriers severely limit our comprehension of the perceptual worlds of others, making the ways in which we survive together often invisible or even unknown. This exhibition is comprised of two distinct yet related works, each in their own way an exploration of the relationship between human and plant life, rooted in our shared terrestrial experience and interdependence, while referencing ideas from science-fiction, architecture, biology and botany.

The title for this exhibition is drawn from Ursula K. Le Guin's 1971 short story *Vaster Than Empires and More Slow*. In it, a plant-based planet is visited by a group of humanoid explorers who—upon finding it devoid of animal life—at first describe it dismissively as 'empty.' While invisible to their human senses, the visitors come to learn that the planet possesses a sophisticated interconnected intelligence and functions as a collective super-organism, yet they experience only a world of “Infinite plants...infinite silences”.

A centrepiece of the exhibition, *A Breathing Room* is a living participatory installation, a greenhouse structure containing the approximate number of plants necessary for one person to breathe symbiotically with plant life over a sustained period. Visitors

are invited to enter the room one at a time to contemplate and visualize this invisible everyday experience. *A Breathing Room* is both a sanctuary from and a comment on the troubled ecological times we live in. Emphasizing the importance and the fragility of our most fundamental relationship, it is a reminder that breathing is not a singular act performed by an individual, but one of symbiosis with many participants.

*Movement Compositions* is series of cyanotypes (sun prints) and animations based on a collection of invisible movements made by plants. Before the availability of technologies such as time lapse photography and film, the movements of plants—while suspected—was imperceptible to the human eye. Charles Darwin (assisted by his son Francis) developed an apparatus by which he could trace movements in plants over time (often a day or more) in order to both prove that plants move and also to describe their patterns. In 1880 the project was published as a book titled *The Power of Movement in Plants*. The tracings that make up the nearly 200 figures in the book are simplified, directional lines stripped of anything recognizable as ‘plant’, illustrating only the patterns made by each unique specimen. Here these figures are re-animated and rearranged, suggesting various movement compositions; a silent dance in plant-time, made visible.





## Further constellations

Jacqueline Bell

A breath is never singular. This is the invitation offered by *A Breathing Room* (2016), one of two works by Amanda White in the exhibition, *Infinite Silences*. A functioning greenhouse, the work takes the form of a white dome that has been constructed from semi-translucent coroplast, a common building material that is effective at trapping heat and light. The dome's rounded design simultaneously reflects the utopian charisma of Buckminster Fuller's iconic geodesic structures, as well as the organic irregularities of the surface of seeds.<sup>1</sup> Just large enough for one person to seat themselves within, the work holds the approximate number of plants necessary for an individual to participate in a symbiotic exchange of breath with the other life forms in the space. Here, to breathe is to take part in an expanded collective, and to renew focus on the daily exchange between humans and the planet's botanical diversity. So much can be contained within a breath.

Also present in the exhibition is a body of work titled *Movement Compositions (for Ten Cabbages, for Ten Flowers, for a Forest, for a Vegetable Garden)* (2017), which includes four cyanotype prints and a silent animation. Each print is dotted with groupings of delicate, geometric line drawings that visually reference sky-bound constellations. The indigo blue of each cyanotype mirrors the depth

of colour of the night, though produced through the photo paper's exposure to the sun. The constellation-like designs are circularly framed, echoing the perimeter of the telescope's lens. But for their emphasis on the sky, these works are not depictions of what we find above. Instead, they can be understood as an invitation to invert the orientation of our gazes, and to view the movements of the most humble terrestrial plants with the same sense of awe we reserve for the planets and the stars.

The prints that comprise *Movement Compositions* are visual referents to those found in Charles Darwin's 1880 text *The Power of Movement in Plants*. The famous evolutionary theorist's constellation-like botanical studies were the outcome of experiments that tracked the movements of plants through a series of marks on glass.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the use of time-lapse film technology, these experiments proved that plants did indeed move of their own accord, though imperceptible to the human eye.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *The Power of Movement in Plants* clarifies what had previously been opaque to the stare of scientific method. While this invocation of science requires a critical eye towards the injustices that it has at times sanctioned, in this case, it is in the methodical reflection on the minutiae of these creatures' movements that wonder can be found.

This relationship of care between the observer and the subject is evident in Darwin's diaristic reflections on the experiments. Within the first few pages of the book, we are introduced to the varied capacities of the plants as if being told of the routines and habits

of friends. The plants “generally rise in the evening and sink in the morning,” an internal rhythm that reflects a daily cycle.<sup>4</sup> Darwin also revels in the plants’ capacity for self-reliance, specifically noting “[t]heir power of straightening themselves.”<sup>5</sup> To shift, to straighten, to rise, to sink. All possible, while still maintaining a sense of rootedness.

Despite their origins in the precise documentation of scientific research, it is the mutable read of these images that lends them potency in the present. What is the astrological reading that could be gleaned from tracing the movement of the earth’s plants, rather than its stars? What fortune for earth’s inhabitants might be predicted by a terrestrial zodiac? And if global biodiversity continues to be compromised, what charts, by sky or earth, will we look to for counsel? In White’s *Movement Compositions (for Ten Cabbages, for Ten Flowers, for a Forest, for a Vegetable Garden)*, it is neither the strictly scientific nor the purely poetic that is offered as a guide. Instead, we are invited to reflect on a constellation of forms of knowledge, not as doctrine, but as tools for our own wayfinding.

**Jacqueline Bell** is acting curator at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

1. This information was shared by the artist in conversation with the author.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Amanda White, “Artist Statement,” Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.modernfuel.org/art/programming/event/828>.

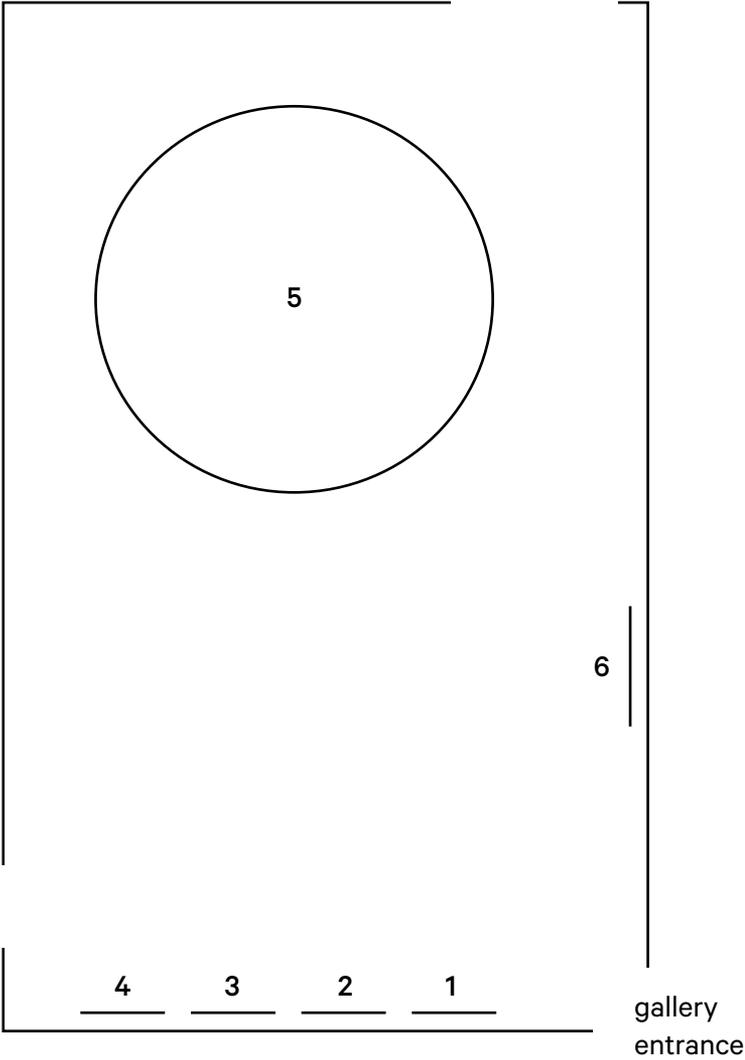
4. Charles Darwin, *The Power of Movement in Plants*. (London: John Murray, 1880): vi, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F1325&view-type=image&pageseq=1>

5. Charles Darwin, *The Power of Movement in Plants*. (London: John Murray, 1880): v, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=F1325&view-type=image&pageseq=1>

**Amanda White** is a Toronto-based visual artist who has exhibited her work at galleries such as The Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, Plug In ICA, the Harbourfront Centre, the Ontario Science Centre, and Forest City Gallery, among others, as well as independently and collaboratively producing many public interventions and engagements. She has participated in residencies including; *Food, Water, Life* at the Banff Centre; *The Neighborhood Spaces Residency Program* in Windsor, ON; and most recently at the Klondike Institute for Art and Culture in Dawson City, YT with Brad Isaacs. Recent publications include articles for *esse magazine* (2016), *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* (2017), as well as chapters for three forthcoming edited collections. Amanda earned a BFA from OCADU, an MFA from the University of Windsor, and is currently a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at Queen's University.

# Exhibition Floor Plan

Main Gallery



*please note that you are welcome to enter the dome*

1. *Movement Composition for a Forest*  
cyanotype print on watercolour paper, 22" x 30", 2017
2. *Movement Composition for a Vegetable Garden*  
cyanotype print on watercolour paper, 22" x 30", 2017
3. *Movement Composition for Ten Flowers*  
cyanotype print on watercolour paper, 22" x 30", 2017
4. *Movement Composition for Ten Cabbages*  
cyanotype print on watercolour paper, 22" x 30", 2017
5. *A Breathing Room*  
dimensions variable, mixed media, 2016
6. *Suite of movements (sunflower, strawberry, fave bean  
cabbage, corn oak, raspberry, cabbage, clover, asparagus)*  
digital animation, 2017

Native plants generously loaned by  
**Paul Heydon, *Grow Wild! Native Plant Nursery***  
***and Ecological Consulting Services***  
**Omeme, ON**



Species:  
Evening Primrose  
Flat-topped Aster  
Foxglove Beardtongue  
Prairie Smoke  
Virginia Mountain Mint  
Yarrow

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Greenhouse design made in collaboration with architectural designer Matt Knapik.

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*Suite of movements* animation assistance by Emmy Skensved.

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