

Jiao Guo: *The Grass Is Stalking You*

The traditional symbolism of grass encompasses a set of established and interconnected concepts, such as growth, renewal, resilience, vitality, cyclicity, and communality. Its connotations can also relate to something primitive, uncultivated, and wild, especially when it has grown together with various weeds and volunteer plants, becoming part of a thicket, incidental vegetation to which we pay little attention. Even when we do think about it, we usually perceive it as some generic, homogeneous ecosystem, and we refer to it with a singular noun – grass – even though it almost always consists of several different species.

The meanings and value of grass in the context of Western thought are perceived anthropocentrically, in the form of a one-way consideration of the human relation to the blades of grass. Accordingly, in contemporary cultural imaginary, the concept of grass has opposing positions: a maintained, dense, green, and short-mown lawn stands as a symbol of luxury, tennis courts, grass carpets, and paid gardeners; at the same time, uncultivated grass represents a place of freedom, lack of constraint, groundedness, and down-to-earthness. In contrast to the understanding of grass in an ecological context stands the economic exploitation of its meaning in the capitalist practices of greenwashing. Furthermore, in the digital sphere of social media, grass becomes a (self-)ironic symbol of human alienation from nature (a well-known example of this is the “go touch grass” meme), while new spiritual and wellness-influencer communities, also ubiquitous on online platforms, quite unironically attribute to it an almost mystical significance, emphasising practices of grounding and mindfulness.

Such a system of thought, which rests on established dichotomies, does not recognise the space in between, the space for concepts that do not belong to any given category. The complete closedness of such a system, in a world that is straining the edges of the conventional and the normative, requires the finding of new solutions, a conscious “unthinking” of existing concepts, and an immersion in creatively imagining displaced ways of understanding our ecosystems. What if this ephemeral, everyday grass were viewed as an entity that has a certain agency, its own will, intention, or aspiration? What if it were to become an entity that not only communicates and acts upon us but also communicates and acts beyond the human species, with other non-human entities? Can we even think about non-human entities that science does not consider alive – could they also have their own volition and aspiration? Where are the boundaries between the living and the non-living, and can we, following an animist understanding, find a certain porosity between these oppositions? Could we engage in a mental exercise, in an attempt to “unthink” the existing perspective and imagine a new, different one – even when the existing language fails us in the process?

The intermedial installation titled *The Grass Is Stalking You* by the artist Jiao Guo is a kind of case study of such an experiment in re-imagining and remapping the meaning of a non-human entity – ordinary grass. *The Grass Is Stalking You* builds on the artist's previous works – *A small lexicon of weird* and *Culture Reproduction* – and also represents one of the iterations of a broader, current collaborative

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project, *Museum Of(f)*, which Guo is developing with the artist Teuta Gatolin. These works represent a continuous exploration of the gaps in conventional formulations and models of thought, unmistakable in their strange, eerie, and even very humorous nature, which invite us to a curious search for new, personal ways of thinking and perceiving the world of which we are a part. At the heart of Guo's artistic work lies an inherent curiosity and a ludic pleasure in discovering and (re)creating strange situations that call for a re-evaluation of the established ways in which we perceive the boundaries of the possible, our society, and the environment.

The artistic strategies and tools she employs are of particular significance, often resting on linguistic constructs and relationships, such as the use of various modalities of humour – absurdity, incongruity, substitution, and so on. Thus, for example, the very title of the work arises from a play on words in which *The Grass Is Stalking You* can connote the aforementioned agency of grass (it is the one that stalks the human, the initiative comes from it), while on the other hand, there is a playful coincidence whereby *a stalk of grass* is a physical part of the plant.

By dissecting the models of existing and possible perceptions of grass in a branched intermedial installation, Guo takes the position of a subtle storyteller who poses a series of questions to the viewer and sets out a spectrum of possibilities of what grass is and what it could be. By juxtaposing different media – from original and modified photographs, collages, objects found in nature, wood engravings, her own poems and those of canonical authors, printouts from web pages to an interactive projection – Guo questions our perception of such concepts as the natural and artificial, analogue and digital, organic and geometric structures, as well as our need to inscribe certain meanings into them and occasionally obscure their boundaries. The ludic elements are particularly evident in the exhibiting and playful treatment of footage of absurd situations in which telecommunication equipment mimics trees, or grass carpets are laid in a way that resembles greening a front garden in a simulation game, where a single click is enough to turn a square unit of surface into the terrain of one's choice – sand, soil or lawn of every kind. In a world full of simulacra, we have no choice but to collectively ask questions about where they belong, why we constantly generate them, what their relation is to the original objects, and how current relations and cracks in representation can guide us towards building a future and fairer understanding of the nature and society we inhabit.

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