

Herbologies/ Foraging Networks

Andrew Gryf Paterson (gb/fi)

Artist-Organiser, Doctor of Arts Candidate in Media Lab, Aalto
University School of Art and Design, Helsinki
Member of Piknik Frequency ry. (Pixelache Festival)
agryfp@gmail.com

The Herbologies/Foraging Networks programme, emerges from the Baltic Sea region, focused in Helsinki (Finland) and Kurzeme region of Latvia, now extends beyond. In a series of events during 2010, it has explored the cultural traditions and knowledge of herbs, edible and medicinal plants, within the contemporary context of online networks, open information-sharing, and biological technologies.

Herbologies refers to the different ways of knowing about plants and their extracts (as well as sometimes fungus and bee products), as wild and cultivated food, medicine and related crafts. Foraging Networks raises awareness of organised behaviours and practices in gathering wild food, including micro to macro ecosystems or socio-political levels. Combining with the fields of social/visual arts, craft, cultural heritage, media, network cultures and technology, attention is made to different ways of sharing knowledge, especially within the Baltic Sea region and between different generations. Furthermore, it has also been initiated from the position of 'not-knowing', and being an immigrant to a landscape and environmental habitat.

The cultural and experiential knowledge about wild useful plants (for eating and medicinal purposes) found in the southern Finnish and Swedish landscape has changed dramatically over the last two generations. The grand-parents, and many parents of the current generation, knew/know many things about the plants and roots surrounding them in the countryside. However, with the mass shift of families to city and urban locations, this knowledge is being lost, slipping away from the younger generation, at a time when information & media sharing online is booming. Across the Baltic Sea, many middle-age and older Latvians (and likewise Lithuanians and Estonians) still carry everyday knowledge with them into the woods, meadows, to the coast, forest and fields. However, even there that is becoming less



Fig. 1: Herbologies/Foraging Networks ISEA Collage

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Herbal Tinctures Workshop – cc Ulla Taipale,
Expedition to Kurzeme – Aiste Virsulyte,
Windowfarms Finland – cc Wojtek Mejr

Photo credits from middle-left:

Herb collection – Signe Pucena,
Dyykkaus table – cc Sigardus,
Bee Observatory – cc Annemie Maes

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Forest foraging – Ossi Kakko,
Kultivator sign – cc Andrew Gryf Paterson

common. There are many published materials in medical or pharmacy books, but very few stories sharing the cultural context – how to gather, how to prepare, how to use, reflections on use and how such knowledge is learned.

Younger people’s interest in sustainable food production and environmental awareness appears to be creating a revived interest in local and ecological use of plants. For those in their teens, 20s and 30s, online information, data and social networking sites have also become the main communication and sharing medium. In addition, do-it-yourself/ourselves ‘maker’ culture has blossomed in recent years thanks to audio-visual culture, and in particular participatory platforms which support digital image or video sharing. Strongly based on community-created content, this trend is also extending to ‘grower’ and ‘forager’ sites, which share example recipes and activities.

How does one attract attention and inter-generational appreciation: With books, interviews, online maps, workshops, mobile-guided tours, open-source information or DNA code? Based in practicalities, Herbologies/Forag-

ing Networks develops a cultural programme of events that shared, in the Baltic context, how to grow individually or together with hydroponics during the dark winter months; and invited artists and designers to go out foraging with wild plant experts, and document countryside traditions from elders in the summer months.

In a similar way that a culture's songs, stories and dances are documented and valued as intangible cultural heritage, we argue that the practices of foraging and 'making' using herbological knowledge are important to document also as cultural traditions of respect: In relation to nature, to promote the ancient, historical and contemporary interdependence people have had with herbs, plants and other related natural produce, and to maintain this continuity.

The different meeting points of the 3 collaborating coordinators – Andrew Gryf Paterson (SCO/FI), Ulla Taipale/Capsula (FI/ES) & Signe Pucena/SERDE (LV) – were introduced at Pixelache Helsinki Festival in March 2010. On that occasion, there were seminar presentations by international artists and Finnish plant experts; curated workshops shared their particular knowledge about processing plant materials – fermentation, alcohol extraction and DNA manipulation; round-table discussion about foraging in the Finnish urban context; and manifestation of the WindowFarms Project was made by locals in the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki.

Most recently a midsummer expedition to rural towns Aizpute and Alsunga in Kurzeme, Western Latvia, was hosted by Interdisciplinary Art Group SERDE in June 2010, with a series of fieldwork excursions and ethnographic interviews for an international and interdisciplinary group of guests. The main topics for the herbologies expedition included how to recognise, gather and use wild plants and flowers for teas, infusions, tinctures, sauna whisks, homemade herbal cosmetics, midsummer crowns, as well as the 'pharmacy' of plants found outside in nature.

These events have been received with interest beyond the Baltic shores, and we look forward to further activities, extending the network to other locations in new collaborations.

<http://pixelache.ac/helsinki/herbologies-foraging-networks>

<http://herbologies-foraging.net/>

<http://agryfp.info>