



# GroWorld: Experiments in vegetal culture

*FoAM, a distributed laboratory for speculative culture emanating principally from the Low Countries, have embarked on GroWorld. A radical research programme into how plant intelligence can inform a botanically inspired culture, GroWorld also integrates insights composted from foAM's new media background. foAM's Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney outline their vegetally inspired vision*

CULTURE, in the sense of cultivation of minds and behaviours, is one of the most enduring phenomena through which we shape our world (Brand 1999). We leave religious sites, shipwrecks and public art as handprints on the environment we share with other species, enhancing and depleting ecosystems. Some preindustrial societies saw themselves as a part of ever-widening cycles of nature. We can still experience their silent memorials in the form of animist and Buddhist temples in Asian landscapes, or pagan sites scattered throughout Europe. With the advent of the industrial age and modernism, European cultures became increasingly divorced from the non-human "planetary other" (McKenna 1992), so that the two evolved in

parallel for a while, only to begin converging again in unlikely places such as sites of failed industrial experiments. The Chernobyl "involuntary park" is a marvel of biodiversity and adaptation to a technological disaster (Sterling, retrieved 2010). Abandoned factories in the German Ruhr are now colonised by cultural initiatives, such as the Zollverein. Both cultural and natural changes are slow but tenacious forces often marginalised in a world dominated by economic rationalism. They are messy tangles of emotional, spiritual and physical values, irreducible to simple graphs and statistical analysis, and as such are often ignored.

On the other hand, technology – another human contribution to the planetary ecosystem – is embraced by the same economic and political powers as a panacea to most contemporary challenges, from environmental turbulence to financial crises. From prehistoric seed-collecting and early agricultural ploughs through to nanotech, technology has become a persistent mark of humanity, in the shape of tools and techniques through which we analyse and interact with the world. Although how we use and think about technology has had a substantial influence on cultural changes and the ecosystems we live in (digital technology being the most recent example), it can never fill the cultural void left in the wake of the erosion of the grand narratives of the 20th century. Technology in isolation cannot provide truly encompassing visions of what a society could become, even though we have attempted to understand culture (and the whole universe) in terms of technological models – as clockwork, steam machine, or computer. The limitations of these models have become gradually apparent as science (and common sense) has