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Hanauri. The Japan of the Flower Sellers

MAO - Museo d'Arte Orientale
Torino, December 4, 2024 – May 5, 2025

Edo, 19th century. A crowded street, a peddler advancing slowly, her shoulders bent under the weight of a wooden structure laden with *azaleas*, *chrysanthemums*, *camellias* or *peonies*. Her body adapts to the load, leaning slightly forward to maintain balance, while the branches sway with each step, following her rhythm, almost as if breathing with her.

Hidden within this image is a complex network of relationships – an economy and an architecture of the living – that intertwines humans, plants, and objects into a single productive organism. This is a scene of labor, but who is laboring? The human, the flowers, or the fragile architecture that binds them together? Too often, we conceive labor – and its economic, cultural, and symbolic implications – as an exclusively human activity, radically intrinsic and embedded into anthropocentric culture. However, reality presents a very different picture.

The *Hanauri. Il Giappone dei venditori di fiori* exhibition at MAO – Museum of Oriental Art in Turin[1] offered a privileged window into this historical and invisible interconnection. Focused on the work of artist Linda Fregni Nagler, the exhibition explores the figure of the Japanese *hanauri bōtefuri*, the itinerant flower vendors of the *Edo* (1603-1868) and *Meiji* (1868-1912) periods. Through a process of re-photography and manual intervention on historical prints, Nagler compels us to observe seemingly ordinary scenes: men and women posing with loads of flowers, images that narrate a world where human, vegetal, and architectural bodies intertwine in a single *choreography of labor*. Time is layered: the photographs of the Yokohama Shashin school – revisited and reinterpreted by Nagler – capture staged and constructed moments, where the act of composition is not just evident but necessary. With exposure times that could reach up to ten minutes, the meticulous arrangement of the scene in front of the camera became essential: largely neutral backgrounds; subtle gestures, unnatural rigidity; the selection of the best botanical species, the placement of vases, the orientation of stems, branches, and blossoms; the angling of the wooden structures, supports and pedestals. Static poses, whose attention to detail suggests an intriguing intersection between labor and culture, underline that the activity of these vendors was not merely a physical effort but also a conscious process of visual and aesthetic staging, where the nonhuman element is an inseparable co-participant: it would be entirely impossible to convey the same message without the presence of plants. But who is the main subject of these photographs? Is it the human carrying and selling the plants? Or the plants themselves – far from being mere commodities but living entities subjected to processes of selection, display, transport, and sale? Or perhaps the mobile micro-architectures – tools designed for display and transport, connecting the vendor and the plants into a single hybrid entity?

The term *Yokohama no shashin* – (the photography of Yokohama) – designates the formative decades of photographic production in Japan starting in the 1860s. With the Japanese *Dawn to the West* after centuries of isolation, the port city of Yokohama becomes a fertile milieu for Western photographers, giving birth to the emergence of the first generation of Japanese photographers.

[1] Hanauri. The Japan of the Flower Sellers. MAO – Museum of Oriental Art, Turin. December 4th, 2024 - May 4th, 2025. https://www.maotorino.it/it/evento/hanauri/, last accessed 24/04/2025. The exhibition presented 26 mid-19th century albumen prints from her personal collection, alongside six large-format hand-colored silver prints and four glass positives displayed through custom visors.

Exhibition view. Photo by Edoardo Piva.

Quickly transformed into a crucial destination of an evolving *Grand Tour*, at that time Yokohama was seen as a fascinating mix of maritime commerce, unknown and orientalism. As Elena Dal Pra observes in her exploration of the nuanced interconnections between Linda Fregni Nagler's practice and Adolfo Farsari's *oeuvre* in the late 19th century[2], the images produced during that period were, in a sense, already vintage–marked by a process of selection, composition and re-contextualization that is also evident in the photographs on display in the *Hanauri* exhibition. Indeed, immobilized in unnatural poses, vendors and plants are subjected to a gaze that fixes them and makes them available for *visual consumption*, staging for *performativity*.

In this *naked exposure*, photography plays a key role: with its power to freeze time, it does not merely capture an image of humans and plants – it renders them an aesthetic *commodity*, transforming them into a visual icon that exists for the pleasure of the observer. And this is no coincidence: the images of the *Yokohama Shashin* school were embedded within an exotic aesthetic that romanticized otherness. Sold to Western travelers, these photographs were fueling a market of images that reduced the Japanese world to a spectacle to be collected, possessed, and displayed. Both human and vegetal bodies in these photographs are made manipulable, available, stripped of any agency.

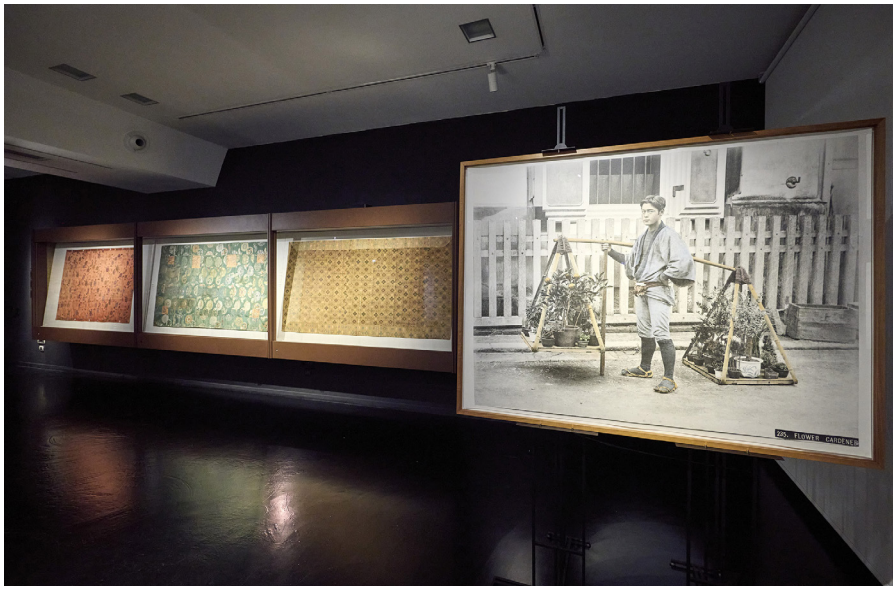
Delving into the entanglement of bodies and their interdependence, this exhibition can evoke a critical examination of botanical domestication through the frameworks of *Animals and Capital* by Dinesh Wadiwel, *Life of Plants* by Emanuele Coccia, and *The Nation of Plants* by Stefano Mancuso. Which are the reciprocal roles played by both human and non-human bodies in the pictures? And how does design become a means of mediation? The human body is trapped in the stillness of the scene, an image that romanticizes labor while concealing what precedes and follows the shot: the fatigue of the weight, the slow and continuous walking through the streets, the interaction with potential customers, and thus, their role as vendors within a precisely structured economic system that ultimately involves the exploitation of *other lives*.

The co-labor of nonhuman species[3] remains a critical and largely unexplored topic, constituting what could be defined as invisible labor. Far from being mere commodities made available for human appropriation and domestication, living vegetal bodies become the human *alter ego* of this disturbing scene. *Other lives*: uprooted, transported, manipulated, and posed, the bare bodies of plants become part of a cultural and commercial infrastructure that transforms them into objects of aesthetic and economic desire. Deprived of their context and reduced to mere exchange value, their exposure is never neutral: it is an unconditional surrender to human agency. *Chrysanthemums*, *azaleas*, and *camellias* – once selected and transported by vendors – no longer belong to themselves. They all share an *invisible nudity* in a state of *silent violence*.

From a human perspective, invoking ethical values such as *empathy*, there is something profoundly unsettling in the awareness of having total control over the *display* of a non-consenting body. *Consent*, traditionally conceived as a cognitive and expressive human capability, becomes a fundamental issue in this context. However, whether human, animal, or vegetal life is concerned, the act of controlling another body – and thus the power to expose and display it – can be linked to an act of violence. An exposed body without consent is,

[2] Elena Dal Pra, "Linda Fregni Nagler e Adolfo Farsari a Yokohama", *Doppiozero*, 2025, https://www.doppiozero.com/linda-fregni-nagler-e-adolfo-farsari-yokohama, last accessed 06/05/2025

[3] Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).



Exhibition view. Photo by Edoardo Piva.

in many circumstances, a vulnerable body: it can be observed, judged, possessed, dispossessed, manipulated, bought, and/or sold.

Furthermore, these photographs reflect another paradoxical tension: a contradiction between *movement* and *stasis*. In traditional perception, plants are rooted, fixed, anchored to the ground, often associated with immobility. And yet, in these images, flowers and potted plants are suspended, detached from the soil, transported and in continuous motion through urban space. Conversely, the itinerant vendor – who, by definition, is a worker in motion, someone whose trade is based on traversing streets, engaging with the city and its inhabitants – is immobilized, frozen in the photographic pose. This inverted scene becomes a metaphor for critically questioning a deeply ingrained idea in Western culture: the conviction that plants are passive, inert beings – more akin to inanimate matter than to living organisms, and entirely devoid of agency. This static representation of nature is not merely a cultural construct but part of a paradigm that has legitimized the reduction of plants to resources and commodities to be exploited without any acknowledgment of their biological autonomy. Both Emanuele Coccia[4] and Stefano Mancuso[5] invite us to overturn this perspective: plants are neither static nor passive, they have a unique way of inhabiting the world, spreading, creating connections, producing a livable environment for other beings and *making kins*[6] with them.

Since 2008, the Turin's Museum of Oriental Art has fostered a dialogue between past and present, material and immaterial, through its permanent collections and experimental exhibitions, exploring Asia from the Middle to the Far East. As a vast archive of geographies, times, and cultures, where artifacts, artworks and documents dissolve the boundaries between dimensions, it is one of the most important institutions in Italy connecting East and West, not only as a custodian of heritage, but also as a space for critical reflection on global narratives and contemporary phenomena[7].

The *Hanauri* exhibition is part of the reinstallation program of the Japanese gallery within the permanent collections, and was entrusted to Linda Fregni Nagler following her previous performance *Things that Death Cannot Destroy*, presented in November 2023.

Within this context, *Hanauri* aligns with a growing international curatorial interest in the entanglements and kins between diversities, investigating the interwoven complexity of nature and culture, and echoing a broader rethinking of how this relationship is staged in institutional contexts.

As an illustration, a critical unfolding of the ecological tensions between humans and nonhumans is given by the exhibition *Formafantasma – Oltre Terra*[8]. The objective, here, is a critical expansion of the natural history diorama. Rather than presenting nature as a frozen tableau, the installation explores the "history, ecology, and global dynamics of wool extraction and production". In this sense, interspecies interactions have always shaped science, representation, workspaces, architectures, and landscapes, defining a dense web of interdependencies where humans and nonhumans co-produce cultures, economies and arts. For instance, the exhibition *Impronte. Noi e le piante*[9], held at the Palazzo del Governatore in Parma in 2024, juxtaposed macro and micro scales of botanical perception, tracing a visual genealogy of natural photography – from early staged compositions of static vegetation to time-lapse sequences of plant growth and chromatically enhanced images of microscopic vegetal traces.

[4] Emanuele Coccia, *La vita delle piante: Metafisica della Mescolanza* (Il Mulino, 2022).

[5] Stefano Mancuso, *The Nation of Plants*, trans. Gregory Conti (Other Press, 2021).

[6] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

[7] For further context, see for example the exhibition *China Goes Urban: The City to Come*, organized at MAO, Turin, October 16, 2020 – October 10, 2021. The exhibition offered a critical reading of contemporary urbanization in China challenging conventional urban models and inviting a reconsideration of the very concept of the city. https://www.chinagoesurban.com/, last accessed 24/04/2025

[8] Formafantasma – Oltre Terra, exhibition organized at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam, curated by Amanda Pinatih, February 15 - July 13, 2025. Originally commissioned by the National Museum of Oslo, curated by Hanne Eide, May 26 - October 1, 2023. https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/formafantasma-en, last accessed 24/04/2025.

[9] *Impronte. Noi e le piante*, exhibition organized by the University of Parma in collaboration with the Comune di Parma and supported by Fondazione Cariparma, Chiesi Group, and Davines Group, January 13 – April 1, 2024. The exhibition unfolded a rich array of mediums – illustrations, sketchbooks, models, even MRIs and X-ray scans – offering a layered reflection on how we observe, archive, and aestheticize the vegetal world. https://www.comune.parma.it/it/novita/comunicati/impronte-noi-e-le-piante, last accessed 24/04/2025.

Exhibition view. Photo by Edoardo Piva.

At first glance, *Hanauri* offers intimate portraits of everyday scenes. Yet these microcosms reveal vast networks and the transformation of bodies as capital. Flower vendors are not carrying plants: rather, they can be critically interpreted as assemblages of human, vegetal, and mobile micro architectures. The structures supporting the flowers are not merely tools of assistance but true prostheses that extend the human body, transforming it into something new: a multispecies Latourian hybrid[10]. These new bodies, *(proto)cyborgs*[11], are organisms *augmented by design* through structures that not only transport plants but also integrate them into an economic and cultural ecosystem. Yet, if design is a prosthesis that connects, amplifies, and transforms, it is also a tool of *power* – a means by which bodies are contained, directed, manipulated, and placed at the service of an economic and productive system. A *commerce of life* – both human and nonhuman.

Through a process of scalar abstraction, *Hanauri*'s images resonate with reflections on contemporary automated landscapes[12] – where capitalism emerges as the dominant economic engine, and design becomes an apparatus of regulation, mediation, and control. From *Edo* flower peddlers to the greenhouses in the Netherlands, history reveals that the production and trade of plants have always been processes of multispecies interaction, where human and nonhuman bodies intertwine, and are exploited in the name of economic logics. No longer a backdrop to production, climatic architectures, computerized greenhouses, and AI-driven environments cannot adapt to the human body; rather, they are optimized for plants as capital. Architecture becomes the connective tissue of the *capital-body*.

In this perspective, design emerges as the medium through which this relationship takes form. Design, understood as the projective act that shapes objects, spaces, and behaviors, is never neutral: it is control, mediation, and the imposition of order. It is the means through which the invisible becomes material, through which multispecies labor is spatialized – a device that embodies the relationship between bodies.

Architectural epistemology has long measured itself with the human body. Vitruvian diagrams, modular systems, the golden ratio – all place the human form at the center of spatial reasoning. Scale became a mechanism of control and the human body, repeated and abstracted into standard, colonized the architectural imagination for far too long[13]. But what happens when other bodies – vegetal, animal, machinic – enter the frame? And what if they are not decorative, not metaphorical, but active and laboring?

[10] Bruno Latour, *Non siamo mai stati moderni* (Elèuthera, 1995).
[11] Donna J. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).
[12] Merve Bedir, Ludo Groen, Marten Kuijpers, Víctor Muñoz Sanz, Marina Otero Verzier, *Automated Landscapes* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2023).
[13] Beatriz Colomina, Mark Wigley, *Are We Human? Notes on an Archaeology of Design* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).