



Creative Work

Olive trees, Silent Spring and a balcony: *Ode to Rachel Carson* by Laura Malacart

Ada Bellanova

Writer and Educator, Italy

Translation from Italian by

Laura Malacart

Visual Artist and Curator, UK and Italy

E-mail: lauramalacart@gmail.com

Abstract

Ada Bellanova offers a critical reflection of the impact and relevance of the installation *Ode to Rachel Carson* by Laura Malacart. The artwork, which opened on the day of the G7 summit, celebrates *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in a specific context at a particular moment in time.

Keywords: public art, art and ecology, Rachel Carson, arte e ecologia, arte pubblica

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On June 13th 2024 in Borgo Egnazia, in the Southern Italian region of Puglia, world leaders come together in the G7 to discuss major global issues which include ecology and the environment. On the same day, 37 km away, an unusual ‘curtain’ appears from a first-floor balcony in the historical centre of Ceglie Messapica.

‘Ain’t this strange?’ think the neighbours.

These are elderly women who worked the land, who cut and sewed or prepared sweets for a living, and who have known each other for a very long time. This ‘curtain’ is rather unusual: it looks like a film strip with vertical black and white stills printed onto the fabric. On them we see an airplane spraying something from above and a headshot of a woman whose expression and raised index finger could be a warning sign, or an accusation perhaps? Who is this woman anyway, is she someone famous?



Ode to Rachel Carson, installation detail, Laura Malacart, 2024

Foreword: A silent spring

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.

Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of

the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. [...]

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community [...] The birds [...] where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted.

The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices, there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.¹

This dark fairy tale with apocalyptic undertones is the opening of *Silent Spring* (1962) by biologist Rachel Carson, a foreboding, warning of the likelihood of a world without bird song.

I wonder if today the author and her book go unnoticed by the fans of the acclaimed sci-fi series *3 Body Problem*. This Netflix series by David Benioff, D. B. Weiss and Alexander Woo, recently available in Italy, is an adaptation of the novel *The Three-Body Problem*, by Liu Cixin, who indeed does mention Carson's book in his novel. The book is set in China at the time of the Cultural Revolution and the young Ye Wenjie, daughter of a scientist killed by the Red Guards, finds solace in the forbidden Western book by Rachel Carson. The quote 'in nature nothing exists alone' has such a powerful impact on her that she will eventually be punished for it.

Yet, if both the novel and the series focus on the dangers threatening the survival of entire civilisations as a consequence of the shortcomings of civilisation and a neglect of ecology, what is the role of Carson's work in this context? Why is her book so dangerous and how come it is prominently featured to frame the opening of the whole narrative?

The catalyst for *Silent Spring* and for the thorough research behind this project, is a secluded oasis in Duxbury, Massachusetts, where the destruction described in the dark forementioned tale had already taken place. It was Olga Owens Huckins who raised the alarm in 1958 when she saw the birds housed in her shelter die after an aerial disinfection against mosquitoes carried out in the area using large quantities of DDT. The insecticide had already been sprayed liberally and indiscriminately on rural areas, woodlands and urban areas of the United States over the course of the previous twelve years. It is for this reason that Owens writes a letter to the Boston Herald and sends a copy with a personal note to her biologist friend Rachel Carson.

Carson immediately sets to work, especially since by now the evidence of the ecological threats from pesticides had been accumulating despite some isolated voices of dissent. She focuses on a careful study of the purposes and side effects of DDT and many other chemical agents that are being used in large quantities; she proceeds through data

¹ R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2002, pp. 1–2.

collection, testimonies and scientific evidence. Carson's post-WWII era is one where an invincible trust has been placed in science and scientists: it is a climate of arrogance with a will to overpower nature, where the 'insect bomb' compares to an atomic bomb. Carson is aware of the risks involved and speaks out about the dangers when science tends towards hyperspecialisation and reductionism, resulting in a lack of consideration for the broader context. Soil, water, air, plants and animals are all connected. As we attempt to target mosquitoes with DDT, the result is that the poison spreads everywhere affecting all life, just as lethal as the toxic dress fashioned by Medea: the outcome is a world where the enchanted forests of fairy tales have become poisoned, 'in which an insect that chews a leaf or sucks the sap of a plant is doomed. It is a world where a flea bites a dog, and dies because the dog's blood has been made poisonous, where an insect may die from vapours emanating from a plant it has never touched, where a bee may carry poisonous nectar back to its hive and presently produce poisonous honey'.²

In fact, in nature, nothing exists in isolation. Plants or animals are poisoned because the insects targeted come into contact with them, feeding on their saps or blood. Just like the robe that the sorceress Medea gives to Jason's future bride disguised as a gift is a covert instrument of death. Unfortunately, the insecticide 'enjoys' a much wider range of action, precisely because plant and animal and plant organisms are all closely connected. The idea that humanity can be immune from poisoning is simply preposterous, a false misconception. Throughout the book, Carson is committed to emphasising — and she is the first to do so — the delicate interdependencies within ecosystems and warns us of the disastrous consequences of human excess. In her research, she argues that DDT not only kills numerous species of insects, including 'useful' ones such as bees, but also causes problems for larger birds and mammals in the food chain, humans included. Chemical companies for obvious reasons have never been fans of her book, yet the public welcomed her research, and her words sparked a major shift in the collective awareness of environmental conservation. And it was precisely the support for her book as well as the attention it generated with President John F. Kennedy that resulted in a repealing of the DDT policy in the United States.

Today pesticides are no longer at the centre of international political debates, and this is possibly because they constitute a danger only in economically disadvantaged areas. Yet, the fact that the problem is still prominent in some parts of the world should be a good enough reason to keep focussing on this issue. And maybe we do not even have to go that far to experience the persistent risks of a systemic use of pesticides because we now have the so-called 'new generation' of pesticides. On September 18th, Butterfly Conservation published an article in *The Guardian* calling on the British government to declare a national emergency due to the drastic reduction in the number of butterflies and to completely ban neonicotinoid pesticides that indiscriminately kill insects and affect pollinators: 'Butterflies are a key indicator species; when they are in trouble we know that the wider environment

² Ibid., p. 33.

is in trouble too. Nature is sounding the alarm call. We must act now if we are to turn the tide on these rapid declines and protect species for future generations'.³

In short, Carson's message does not cease to be current. Even when we take into account all the major issues on the environmental agenda, namely greenhouse gases, global warming, new forms of pollution such as microplastics, scarcity of resources, especially water, all issues that the biologist could not foresee, the message of *Silent Spring* remains fundamental 'for the way it invites us to think about the environmental issues of the present: ecosystems, deadly chains, reasoning based on data, the claim of beauty, political stances, and the quest for solutions'⁴. Importantly so, when looking for solutions to deal with these issues, we cannot do this from an arrogant and presumptuous position that claims to be able to control nature; instead, we need to adopt sensible and sustainable ways to operate in the environment, especially when we do so for our own benefit. This outcome can only be possible with informed knowledge and an awareness of the issues at hand.

Ode to Rachel Carson and the importance of context

On the installation *Ode to Rachel Carson* that appeared on June 13th in Via Murigini — a white nineteenth-century street — we see a headshot of Rachel Carson with a raised index finger, which alternates with sinister images of planes spreading DDT over American landscapes. Two of the frames featured in this installation are from the CBS documentary aired on the 3rd April 1963, in which the biologist presented her work to the nation with calm and assertion, despite undergoing cancer treatment. A few weeks later, Kennedy's advisors produced a report that corroborated the main thesis of her book, endorsing her expertise and therefore deepening its impact.

The author of *Ode to Rachel Carson* is Laura Malacart, an Italian-born visual artist who has lived in the UK for well over three decades. Her research-based and interdisciplinary work uses video, photography, text, installation and participatory performance to address contemporary issues. She focuses on questions around power and ethics when it comes to human and non-human beings and on histories that are marginalised by mainstream narratives. Her practice is conceived as a tool to open conversations and learn together, from the planning and research stages, to its delivery that includes a scope for public engagement. In this context, site specificity becomes significant for the work.

When it comes to the streets of traditional southern villages, we often find, especially in summertime, open doors, windows and balconies, as an invitation to communicate, exchange and meet up. This balcony is not strictly conceived as an exhibition space, but rather a visual cue to intrigue the viewer and stimulate learning and exchange. It protrudes into the street towards its passers-by, inviting them to gaze up, to encounter an unusual

³ P. Barkham, 'Butterfly emergency' declared as UK summer count hits record low, *The Guardian*, 18th Sept 2024.

⁴ P. Giordano, Prefazione to R. Carson, *Primavera silenziosa*, Italian trans. C. A. Gastecchi, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2023, p. 12.

sunscreen. The artist is deliberately inclusive when it comes to her neighbourhood: she engages in conversations about life and about Carson's concerns with pesticides with the elderly farmers who live opposite and who fill the side road with potted plants, or with the 94-year-old Domenica who lives alone in the same house where she once prepared biscuits.



Ode to Rachel Carson, installation @thebalconyprojectceglie, Laura Malacart, 2024

At the end of summer, the fabric is de-installed and The Balcony Project Space (@thebalconyprojectceglie) is ready to host new interventions. Its ethos and ambition to stimulate knowledge and exchange chimes for me with Rachel Carson's message: 'It is the public that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts'. In Rostand's words, 'the obligation to endure gives us the right to know'.⁵ People need to become aware about the issues concerning their lives, their territory, and the environment in which they live, and the work of art can stimulate this cognitive process.

The opening date of the installation *Ode to Rachel Carson* is significant. The scientist's gesture warns us today not only of the risks of pesticides use but also of all the urgent environmental issues we are facing. In this sense, what is the commitment of the world's leaders who gathered a few kilometres away for the G7 on the 13th June 2024? All the while Robert White-Stevens speaking on behalf of the agricultural and chemical industry in the 1963 CBS documentary was addressing Carson in a patronising and dismissive tone, demonstrating his lack of awareness for the weight and impact of her research.

It was Carson, an unaffiliated woman scientist in a world stamped by the arrogance of science and industry, the first to paint a picture of the environmental dangers and to instigate a change of pace in environmental policies of the USA and of the world. Rachel Carson's face in this installation becomes emblematic of a new awareness, understanding and knowledge of the environment that comes with a desire for genuine wonder and care for nature. Her expression alerts us to the fact that there are shared expectations when it comes to the conclusions of the G7 and hopes for significant decisions at the political level — expectations also shared by the WWF.

Instead, the fact that the outcomes of the summit appear limited and inconclusive, not only according to the environmentalist press, is a sign that there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve a significant change, both by those in power but also by individual citizens.

Where to start then, if not from an informed understanding of the issues pertaining to the land in which we all live? If we do and reconsider the context in which *Ode to Rachel Carson* was installed, we can fully appreciate its message. Under the biologist's gaze and gestures are, in fact, Puglia's diseased olive trees. Laura Malacart tries to circulate knowledge amongst the public, be it neighbours, curious passers-by or participants: she organises a public reading of Carson's work and invites a local agronomist into the open space of the gardens of the municipal villa. Emanuela Sardella talks about how pesticides have evolved since Carson's intervention, and their use in the treatment of Xylella. Here, *Silent Spring* comes to mind again: 'We have subjected enormous numbers of people to contact with these poisons, without their consent and often without their knowledge'.⁶

Are we heading towards another black fairy tale? Which would begin, something like:

⁵ R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, 2002, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

once upon a time there was a land full of woods; then, where there were the fragno (a local oak) and the downy oak, human beings had forced the planting of olive trees and the government incentives had created vast lands of monoculture. The spittlebug arrived. Indeed, to tell the truth, the spittoon had always been there: the elderly farmers remembered the foam of this insect. But now this species was carrying a bacterium called Xylella. And the olive trees began to dry up. It was a massacre of giants. Then came the culling. And the treatments...

The yearly directives of 24th May on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environmental Protection enforce the use of pesticides in the countryside of the listed municipalities to target a reduction of the adult population of *Philaenus spumarius*, or spittlebug, the vector of *Xylella fastidiosa*. Yet none of the suggested products specifically target this insect: so, what are the effects on other insect populations, bees, butterflies and all pollinators? What are the consequences on the ecosystem? Do we have adequate knowledge of the level of environmental and, consequently, health risk?



Disseccamento (drying up) of the olive trees, still photograph, Laura Malacart, 2024

Conclusions

If Rachel Carson managed to trigger an unprecedented socio-political shift⁷, what would it take today to instigate an ecological revolution that incorporates political, social and global action? Is there still hope for this? Jonathan Franzen in his short essay *What If We Stop*

⁷ D. Brinkley, *Silent Spring Revolution: John F. Kennedy, Rachel Carson, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and the Great Environmental Awakening*, Harper, New York, 2022.

*Pretending*⁸ is hopeful and invites us to commit by putting aside the thought of the now inevitable apocalypse of a not-too-distant future, and by suggesting that we give special attention to the biodiversity crisis by acting with love and kindness and by taking care of what is closest to us in everyday life.

Yet love and care must meet knowledge and awareness. After all Carson reminded us in *The Sense of Wonder*⁹ that no child should grow up without having listened to the chorus of birds at dawn in spring.

To become acquainted with nature, one needs to have a kind and open disposition towards it and with this attitude we must do everything in our power to avoid silent springs. It is a collective and shared journey, where people come together, also thanks to a work of art on a balcony.

⁸ J. Franzen, *What If We Stopped Pretending?*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 2021.

⁹ R. Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, Harper and Row, New York, 1965.