

Stedelijk  
Museum

# BUREAU AMSTERDAM

➔ NO 15

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*Mike Tyler*

*15 juli - 20 augustus*

*1995*



Mike Tyler, 1993, *Sapponaria Officinalis* (soapwort)  
for University of Utrecht, Botanical Gardens

#### INTERVIEW MIKE TYLER BY RIEK WESTERHOF

RW: Why Amsterdam?

MT: Why do I work in Amsterdam or live here?

RW: Live here.

MT: ummm?

RW: You don't need to answer this one. (laugh)  
Stay calm.

MT: Another one.

RW: What about science?

MT: What about science?

RW: You don't need to answer. (laugh)

MT: Well... uh let's go on to the next one.

RW: Do you know some lies about culture?

MT: Am I even trying to uncover lies about culture? I think it's hard to know what culture is any more. I think there's no real way to lie about culture, not possible, culture is fiction - it's temporal, a mixing of resources, material and human, no culture, only people doing what they do. It's funny, just to play with the word, in my

work culture can imply a living organism. Back to your science question or specifically biology. It's interesting, these words media and culture. You grow a culture on a medium. Different bacterial cultures produce different kinds of cheese (laugh). Maybe that's the arrogance of culture, whose cheese tastes better? The media is the nutritive substance and if the conditions are right a culture flourishes.

RW: Different disciplines, different significance in words.

MT: Sure it's a semantic thing... Yet like stock cultures or seeds, memes\* are transmitted cultural traits which start out small and if successful, can influence world history. Our media have literally become our growing formula. But in the laboratory the idea is to keep the media clean, often sterile...

RW: Under control...

MT: You don't want any unwanted cultures



Mike Tyler, 1994-5, untitled  
Communities of wild plants. Polluted parking area, Amsterdam South-West

getting in your media! How different from the world at large, which is not exactly under control, thankfully. There is still a desire among some for a monoculture, perhaps they see others as an infection, a virus, and not as an anti-body, an immune system. Symbiosis...

The question is what will we get when all cultures have been mixed and are linked informationally, we are just as afraid of monolithic "sameness" as we are of wholesale cultural invasion. Now it still holds true that some autonomy can be possible in a complex, vital system. I hope so...

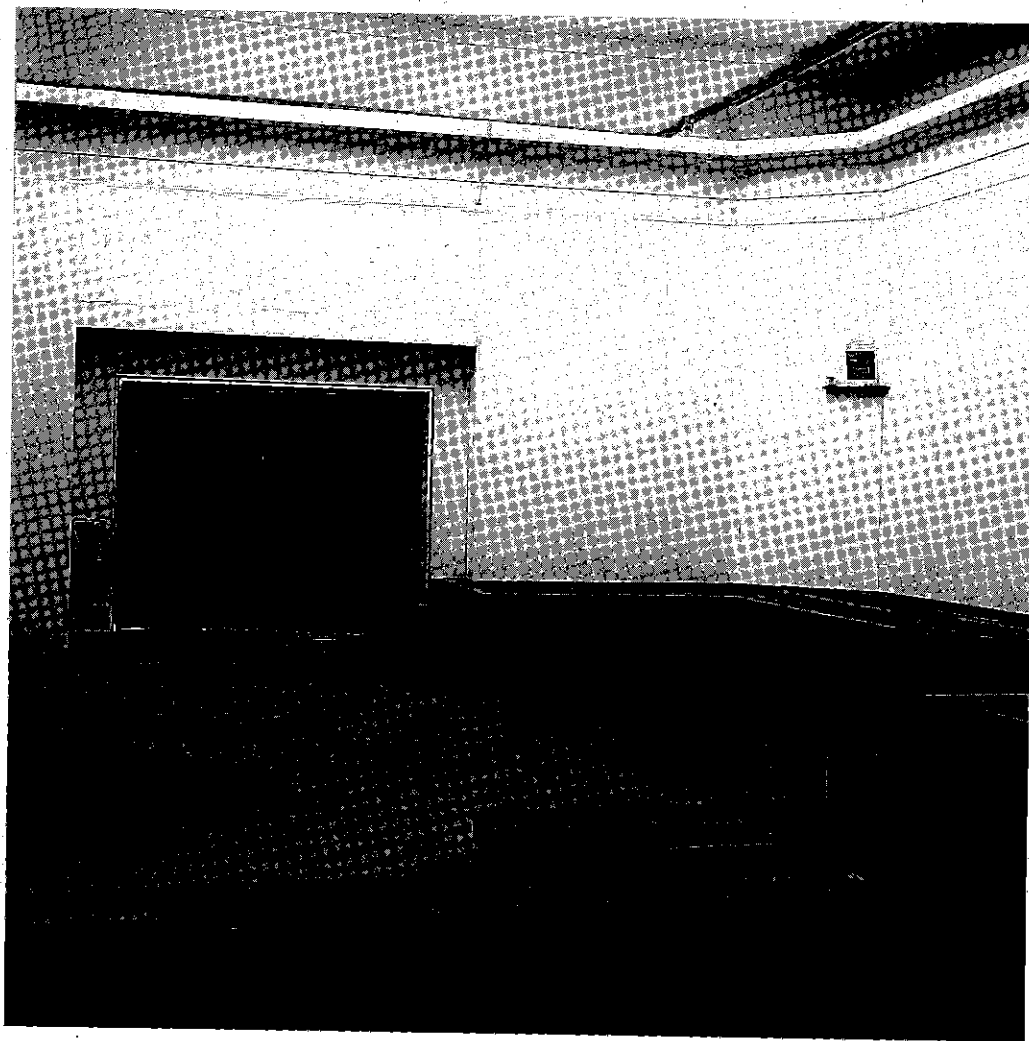
RW: Vital, hum, changing?

MT: Change is scary... Sometimes it implies a loss of identity. I don't have to tell you about life and change. Tomorrow is a new day! It's the art of living! (laugh)

RW: (laugh) Is it a fascination you have for art as living matter or is there more... a belief in something?

MT: It's a cross-over, I'm not sure if I believe they are compatible but it's worth trying. A lot of artists have pushed in that direction, bringing the **operations** of nature into art. Art never had the time-based qualities we now take for granted in film or video, and yet it's all about stabilizing the relentless flow of forms in nature, to hold time in your hand. In that way art was always closer to magical than to rational belief. Freezing some life in stone or pigment, artists just kept pushing it, I believe in pushing it. Funny though, it's natural variation which leads to originality. Maybe someone in history looked exactly like me but he didn't think the same, feel the same or do what I am doing. The art object and life object are similar. We've always manipulated living things, long before we understood chromosome counts, DNA... Biologist or sculptor, it's another disciplinary fuzzy area.

RW: I heard yesterday on the news that parents



Mike Tyler, 1994, Meditation on gasoline/ Meditation sur l'essence  
Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, Brussel

can opt for a boy or a girl nowadays. It was about bringing this choice within the reach of everybody...

MT: At the same time that we get more and more "control" artists get the feeling that what we need is a good dose of disorder, disintegration. These precepts have led often to the understandable response: "Anybody could do that" but I've always liked work which seemed indeterminate, a bit out of control...

RW: You think it influences our awareness... to put some chaos in art. You said that we have things under control. Isn't it that, at least the way I look at it, the more we think we have things under control, the less we do. It's a contradiction.

MT: Yes, living with contradiction. It's hard to accept contradictions as being the truth, as being correct. It's this desire to prove something one way or the other. Every creation kills some

possibilities as it creates new ones. Formalisms can terrorize us. We've gotten so used to graphs and logical explanations: this data rubs that event rubs that butterfly and the global picture expands until it leaves the earth, and we look back, uh...how big is the universe? We're getting smaller. Think if you were looking at the earth from outer space: all human pains and follies, life's struggles, all seem rather charming and self-evident, but when you're here, reduced to the terrestrial, when you're a pedestrian and you're the one who's feeling and trying to make sense of a large, sprawling world, it just seems impossible to make order of that, without all of our plotting and mapping and even poetry making. But you have to admit we're more likely to attempt control now, and have better tools to achieve it. Like choosing the sex of your child, and of course some will resist the control, some will choose chance...

RW: Or just being human...

MT: But there's nothing not human about making the choice. I think if people have the opportunity to make a choice like that, some people will choose to use that, and that's their right, it's not immoral. I just think there will be those who prefer not to, for whatever reason.

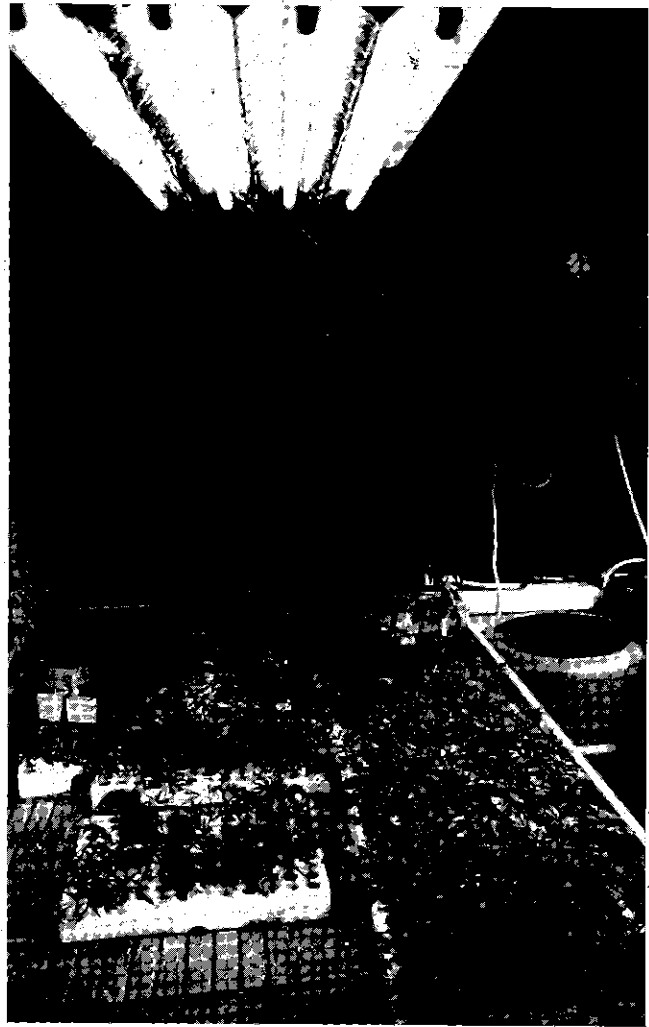
RW: You said something about mapping and knowing where you are. You can sit at a table and make plans to go somewhere and as soon as you're walking in the environment it's quite different. Everywhere there is a potential for sensation. Do you create landscapes? When I think of your work in Brussels (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, 1994) it was like a landscape or a meditation on landscape.

MT: I think this word landscape is a bit tricky. Because (and now we're back to the subject of maps reinforcing our sense of where we are) the awareness of what we call landscape seems to be a fairly recent by-product of painting. It's like perspective and picturesque views. Garden builders throughout history have created landscapes and landscape painting was a kind of gardening. It's a certain way of looking, like in Brussels, I overheard one woman say as she got up on the deck and was walking around, "It's like I'm on vacation again". Maybe she associated it with being at a beach resort, maybe that act of appreciating landscape had a relevance to her as a tourist - a certain jarring of memory - like a replica, trying to pass as the real thing - every garden is in a sense a replica - ... I believe that in China, decks or viewing platforms are created as a way of certifying a great landscape. I'd like to say "this place is important because I've built this deck around it" and maybe it's terribly boring... or would be without the deck. I'd like to lift people up above a space and have them look at it in a different way. It fits my needs right now; ripping-off this old trick.

RW: Isn't art usually a trick of sorts?

MT: It's not really right to call even the best gardens works of art because literally they're miniature worlds where artifact interfaces with process, a superimposition. I've heard it said that what's missing for most gardeners to make them feel like artists is a sufficiently harebrained plan (laugh)... a trick maybe...

RW: A museum is not a place that is associated with gardens, at least not inside the museum itself... You've worked for a botanical garden (Utrecht, 1993) designing educational plant models, but real plants, where do they fit in, do



Example of indoor growing area  
Hydro-culture cuttings in rock-wool, a mother plant with a  
new generation under artificial light,  
Cannibis Sativa

you have problems with the idea of 'indoors' and 'outdoors'?

MT: That has been problematic... a couple of years ago my big fascinations were artificial life, that is: how we take bio-logical principles like self-organization, self-replication and transfer them to our techno-logical systems. I liked this confusion over what was **true** nature and **real** life. At the same time I was looking for signs of urban wildlife, plants which pushed themselves between cracks in the sidewalk or which species could grow on polluted industrial sites... Re-introductions of native species and attempts to reconstruct living communities. So when I was dealing with botany, wildness and spontaneous propagation were the keys. Now that I've taken to building gardens indoors I find myself using techniques which we associate with indoor agriculture.

RW: You mean, like here in Holland, a glasshouse approach, control and economy?

MT: Control and economy exactly! Growing plants is big business, as you know. When a plant fails to produce, someone doesn't make money. That's the mentality behind a lot of the indoor techniques. Some I find disturbing and also beautiful: hydro-cultures which never come in contact with soil, tissue culture cloning, the addition of growth regulators, artificial lights, gas heaters...

RW: There are also organic approaches to glasshouse cultivation...

MT: True... I've been trying a bit of everything... I just want the plants to thrive... to like being where they are... It's perplexing, containment, moral responsibility?... I think the public's image of an ideal ecosystem must change from one of closely clipped lawns to more complex and varied aspects of natural communities. Actually we are quite accustomed to hypercomplexity. We accept an erratic view of nature because it corresponds to our day to day experience... But its easy to say I love wilderness as I sit in this comfortable chair (laugh)... It's funny... I always felt excluded from the wild landscapes in central California where I grew up. Too inhospitable. We lived in the middle of nowhere. My parents later moved to a golf course! I guess it's a search, a need we have for an inner experience, a radical dynamic. Nowadays I find any kind of scenery, even if it's artificial and desolate, can be a source of pleasure. It's all about the dynamics of that place, about awareness.

June 16, 1995

\*from: Richard Dawkins, The selfish gene

## Biografie

### MIKE TYLER

werd geboren in 1964 in Ventura, Californië, Verenigde Staten. Hij woont en werkt in Amsterdam.

## Video

Voor de entree ruimte van Bureau Amsterdam heeft Mike Tyler een circa zestig minuten durend programma samengesteld met fragmenten uit een viertal (natuur-)wetenschappelijke films.

### Cymatics

van Dr. Hans Jenny (1992) documenteert verschillende processen in organische materialen, met name de wisselwerking tussen vorm, materie, energie en trilling. **Plant Dynamics** van Dr. Robert H. Woodworth (1990) brengt door middel van micro-fotografie, 'real-time' en 'time-lapse' filmsequenties de groei van planten in beeld. **The**

**Beaches are Moving** (productie North Carolina Public Television, Environmental Media, z.j.) laat processen van duin formatie en erosie zien, onder andere met archiefmateriaal en computeranimatie. **Loon Country by Canoo** van Dan Gibsons (1985) is het filmische verslag van een kanotocht door een ongerepte wildernis: "Think of a wilderness refuge. A reliable escape at the end of the day, available always, when you need it most."

## Nieuwsbrief

U kunt zich abonneren op de Nieuwsbrief van Bureau Amsterdam. Als u f. 25,- overmaakt op girorekening 4500092 t.g.v. Dienst Musea voor Moderne Kunst te Amsterdam onder vermelding 'Nieuwsbrief Bureau Amsterdam' krijgt u de Nieuwsbrief een jaar lang toegestuurd. U ontvangt dan tevens de uitnodigingen voor de openingen.

## Colofon

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