

# **Ultra Violets**

**by**

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## Declaration of Committee

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## **Abstract**

*Ultra Violets* is a performance piece devised through a personal study of how queer becoming and feminine subjectivity intersect within a close study of plant history and life. Through a collective study of various house plants, the choreography and design of this piece were devised from the ways these plants move, grow, and respond to light—specifically, violet light. This intersection of queer life and plant histories manifests within a design that is part greenhouse, part underground dance club, two spaces that enable conditions for growth and becoming for plants and queer individuals. With a focus on working with light and haze as an architectural element, this work explores what it means to be seen; to abstract perspectives of our bodies and space through the use of disco aesthetics, queer ecology, and integrated design. In doing this, *Ultra Violets* depicts the nuances of joy, grief, and celebration in our process of becoming oneself.

**Keywords:** Queer Ecology; Feminine Subjectivity; Queer Becoming, Disco Aesthetics; Devised Performance; Design Lead Creation

## Dedication

I have the deepest gratitude for the people who supported the creation of this work. To my supervisor committee and mentors Wladimiro Woyno Rodriguez, and Erika Latta. To my incredible cast and team: Claire Brown, Charlie Cooper, Bernice Paet, Anna Wang-Albini, Sydney Bluck, Desiree James, Charlotte Samuel, and Aisha Wewala. To my extended ensemble: Samantha Buss, Natalia Martineau, Sarah Finn, Chantal Gering, Lauren Han, Kelsey James, Kira Radosevic, Sarah Van Gaalen, Samantha Walters, and Cassandra Williams. To the support system that is Zaarah Lopez, Justine Chambers, Rob Kitsos, and Mauricio Pauly. Thank you for helping make this work possible.

This work is a love letter to light, and to dancing under mirror balls in rooms filled with love and kindred spirits. To all the fierce queer women who have aided in my own process of becoming, thank you for celebrating what I've shaped into.

## Acknowledgements

The performance of *Ultra Violets* and this research takes place on the unceded stolen lands of the Coast Salish People: the Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), Squamish (Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw), and Tsleil-Waututh (səlilwətaʔt) Nations, and engages with the plant life found on these lands- in forests, in our homes, and in our communities. In learning to listen to and understand these plants and their life cycles, we offer gratitude for the lessons and learnings we have been able to discover through this process, and gratitude to the hosts on whose lands we have been able to work, play, and engage in this research.

I would also like to acknowledge the following plant life worked with during this process:

*Calethea Makoyana Plant*, under the care of Alexandra Caprara

*Weeping Fig Tree*, under the care of Anna Wang-Albini

*Calamansi Plant*, under the care of Aisha Wewala

*Jade Pothos*, under the care of Desiree Keresztes James

*Arrowhead Plant*, under the care of Sydney Bluck

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## Glossary

Astera Light	Astera (theatrical light manufacturer); Astera Titan Tube Lights, tube shaped LED lighting fixtures.
Becoming	The process of coming to be something or of passing into a state.
Gaga	A movement language created by Ohad Naharin, that used improvised movement lead by somatic experience, bodily sensation, following instinctive movement and experiencing freedom and pleasure.
Germination	The process of something coming into existence and developing; the development of a plant from a seed or spore after a period of dormancy.
LED Light	A colour changing light fixture; an electric light that produces light using light-emitting diodes.
Photosynthesis	The process by which green plants and some other organisms use sunlight to synthesize foods from carbon dioxide and water.
Queer	Defined by bell hooks within this research as: “being about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”
Rhizome/ Rhizomatic	In botany, a rhizome is a continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral roots at intervals; or, as defined by Deleuze: “theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation.”
Rot	The process of decaying.
Tropism	The turning or movement of a (plant) organism in a particular direction based on external stimulus such as light, water, gravity, substance, or touch.
Viewpoints	Created by Anne Bogart, a movement-based practice that provides a framework for creating and analyzing performance using spatial relationships, shape, time, emotion, movement mechanics, and the materiality of the body.



# Defence Statement

## Introduction

To become is cause for celebration. This piece was set in a place of becoming- a greenhouse, a dance club, a space designed for becoming to take place, to grow into oneself. “Becoming” for queer individuals is often a process that is out of order, fragmented, or interrupted. Much like a plant’s ontological drive to become nonetheless despite adversity, this piece acknowledges the ways our community of queer and marginalized individuals have also undergone, and persevered, through adversities, which are still heavily present today. In the wake of grief and hate, sometimes the only thing we feel we are left with are spaces for community; these spaces to dance, to cry, gather and honour one another. To lay out flowers for each other in celebration of life lived and lost, and to plant gardens for futures that we are making for ourselves.

This project embodies a space for queer joy simultaneously overcoming grief, while celebrating and recognizing the never-ending endurance of becoming oneself. We turn to bell hook’s use of the word “queer” as our core definition:

“Queer’ not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but ‘queer’ as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (Brownworth)

# Seeds

## Background

In my work as a director, designer, and writer, my practice has been grounded in explorations of the queer experience, bodily autonomy, femininity, and somatics. My training is specialized in devised creation, with a specific focus on working with movement and design. I focus primarily on lighting, video, and scenography, and have strived to converge these skills within my research as a devised creator. I believe devised creation establishes a de-hierarchical process, one that feels inherently queer and “rhizomatic” in the sense that it allows for a collective embodiment of research. This methodology opens avenues for subverting existing power dynamics in standard creation practices, encouraging lateral thinking and harmonious pursuits of design, direction, and performance. Rather than treating design as something that serves an existing work, I practice design lead methodologies that center this kind of harmony while asking: *what does it mean to devise alongside a partner that has no voice, such as technology, and establish it as a collaborator? How would this encourage harmonious design processes that could challenge conventional methods of making?*

## Work During MFA

My first year focused on treating design as a performer in space, and how technology could embrace the organic in both form and content. This manifested in my piece, *Body, Becoming*, which was accomplished through creating what I called a “video loop pedal” using live feed video and a delay effect patch. It also featured a disco ball, a motif that I was finding increasingly present within my work as a symbol of queerness, queer joy, and liberation. This is informed by Legacy Russell’s “Glitch Feminism” where Russell talks about becoming for queer individuals:

“Glitch feminism urges us to consider the *in-between* as a core component of survival- neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define for ourselves. Thus, the glitch creates a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest” (Russell, 11).

Quoting feminist and writer Simone de Beauvoir's famous line, "one is not born, but rather one becomes a woman" Russell posits instead: "one is not born, but rather one becomes a body" (12). This became an anchor of how I wanted to explore abstractions of the body and ideas of becoming in the context of performance.



**Figure 1.** Still from archival of *Body, Becoming* 2022.

Delving further into what influences can illicit becoming, I identified three points of study: becoming through transformation of the self; becoming through our environment; and becoming through meeting and knowing other people, creating somatic resonance.

In *Composite Vibrancy* I worked with four students to explore the ways we could depict where somatic resonances occurred in our bodies. Using, Gaga, contact improv, motion capture and Touch Designer to generate patterns from our physical explorations, I composed two ways of depicting this notion of becoming- a physical and digital score that visualized their physical experience through video projection. We experimented with the idea of "jump cuts," which is simply the act of having sudden, sharp lighting cues that snap between darkness and light. This mechanism created an illusion of how this group can appear to be one body- swapping in and out of place, depicting how these somatic resonances can be collectively felt, or transferred, across the ensemble. Becoming is

something time based; the process of becoming is gradual, invisible, and jump cuts are a way of skipping through that process to show an accelerated, hyper specific version of how we become in the work. There is agency found in this process, of revealing these resonances in our own queered sense of time and perspective.

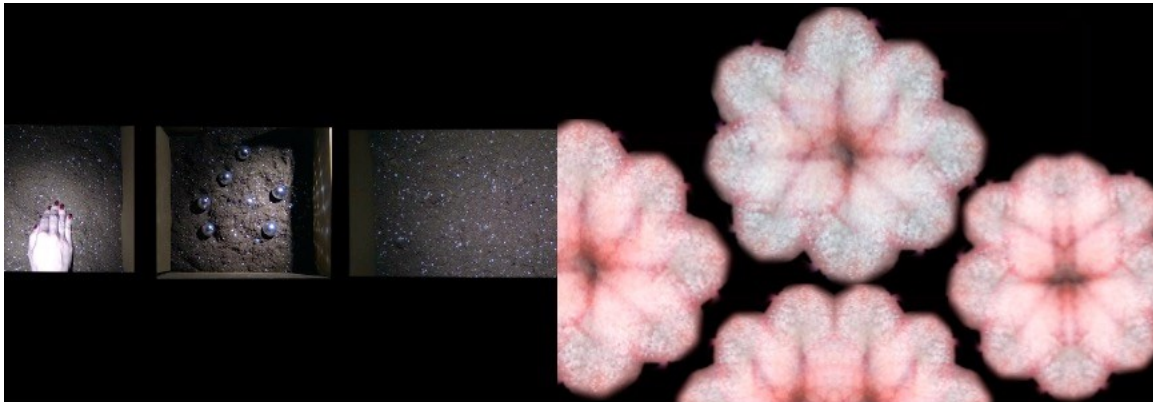


**Figure 2.** Touch Designer patterns on motion capture footage, *Composite Vibrancy*, 2022

Queering perspective comes from Sara Ahmed's book, "Queer Phenomenology" which guided our devising period. Ahmed defines queering perspectives as a way to "disturb the order of things... a making strange" of our perspectives (Ahmed, 161). This creates a form that is a fragmented, controlled and contained process of revealing and concealing, as if to say: *I am giving this to you on my own terms*. Intentional fragmentation within this work therefore "makes strange" by introducing a new way of seeing perceptions of bodies and space.

## Studio Research

Before reaching out to my collaborators, I turned to my calathea plant. I was fascinated by its movement pattern, which evoked a curiosity in new ways I could define what it meant to work with organic and digital elements in a process where plants were the collaborators. I reached out to professor and artist Jane Tingley, who founded *SLOlab: Sympoietic Living Ontologies lab*, an interdisciplinary research-creation laboratory that focuses on interconnections between plant life, and technology. She directed me towards further research around plant tropisms and plant studies, including *Radical Botany*, where authors Meeker and Szabari discuss the ways plants have acted as mobilizing agents for creating speculative futures. This text was pivotal in connecting my research on becoming to my interest in working with plant life, as it directed my inquiry into the rich historic and philosophical connections between plants, feminine subjectivity, and queer history within the context of what it means to “become.”



**Figure 3. Video stills from studio explorations**

The initial stages of this research focused on generating content from a design perspective to draw connections between my study of plant tropisms and becoming. I discovered an intimacy and eroticism in pursuing this, and leaned into eroticism as a way of subverting the existing dialogues around feminine subjects and plant life- a dialogue that was often passive, docile, and innocent. As a starting point I was interested in tongues as a “fragment” of the body that evokes the erotic, an image that is “inside” brought outward to reveal the hidden, internal process of becoming. To investigate these connections further, I identified germination, rot, and photosynthesis as the three pillars of becoming within plants I wanted to explore from, defining them in my own work as a

process of discovery and reinvention (germination); a process of loss and death (rot) and a process of kinship and connection (photosynthesis).



**Figure 4. Image of plants growing in violet light in Milan, 2023**

The most formative connection I made was the discovery of purple lighting used in greenhouses. Purple lighting accelerates a plant's process of photosynthesis, creating better conditions for higher growth potential. After attending a queer event in the city, I began noticing violet being used frequently within club settings; this synchronicity allowed me to realize my need to attend to space and lighting as a connecting point between my ideas. This was the soil for this project, a starting point into the ways I wanted this work to highlight how our environments can shape the ways we become.

## Flowering: Creation Process

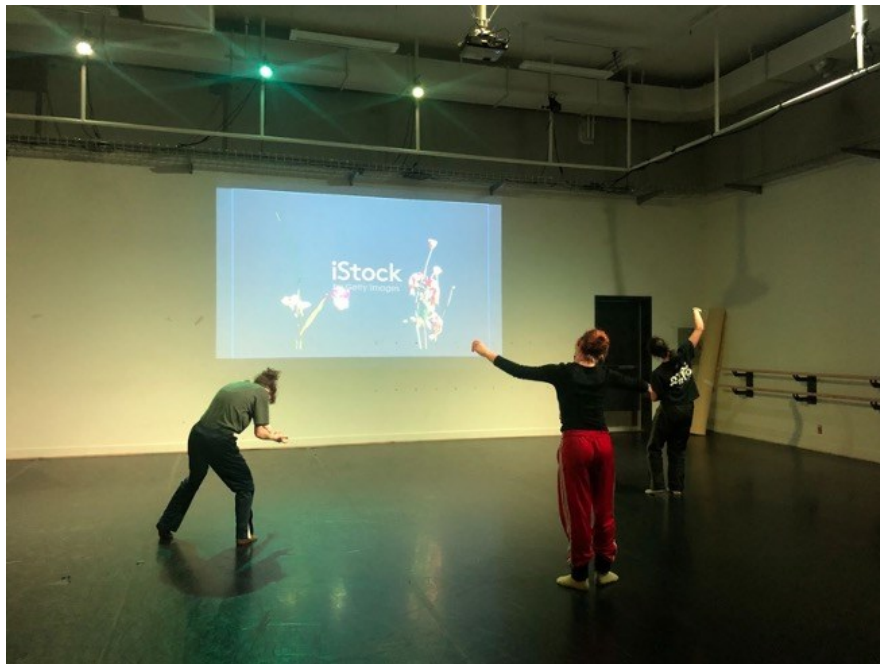
### Movement Methodologies

To have attempted to encompass all kinds of plants in this work would have been impossible and insufficient. What resonated from my research was to physically engage and collaborate with plants through establishing relationships and care for the life I was working alongside. To do this, we began from a study of personal perspective and interpretation of houseplants we already had in our homes.



Figure 5. Image of Alexandra's Calathea plant

I turned to Robin Wall Kimmerer’s writing on listening and treating relationships to plants with reciprocity in mind. To quote from her book “Gathering Moss,” she writes: “mosses don’t speak our language...I chose to adapt to a different pace” (77). Kimmerer makes the note that this research for her took years; though our process was contained to only a few months, the intention from Kimmerer resonated. To engage in earnest listening, I asked my ensemble to sit with their plants and create a “plant profile” of their houseplant of choice. This is a document consisting of observations and details about the plant, including colour, texture, pattern, and other visual descriptions; as well as notes on care instructions, how they got the plant, and how long they’ve cared for it. This method was inspired by my previous work with Rob Kitsos on *Moving Matter*, where we used our observational research as a starting point to generate movement. From these profiles, we developed one-word lists of the observational qualities that we could tangibly translate within our bodies. This included deciphering abstract qualities of our plants- what were their tempos, their vibrations, and rhythms? This task began our collaboration with the plants without disrupting or harming them, allowing our source material to come from a place of relationality and care. Using these words to prompt a series of open-ended movement improvisations, we experimented with the ways these words resonated and initiated movement on an individual and collective scale.



**Figure 6. Ensemble practicing biomimicry with timelapse videos of plants wilting**



To further embody what it meant to move in the same quality of plants, we also engaged in our own physical study of biomimicry. We studied various online videos of plant tropisms; time lapses of beans growing, plants moving in wind and following the sun, plants opening and closing, blooming and dying, among others, and tried to embody the ways these plants moved, following the shapes and pathways they created.

In focusing on tropisms initiated by responses to light, we experimented with engaging with various light sources throughout our process. Focusing on small, skinny shafts of light, the dancers interacted with the beam using only fragments of their body. I invited my collaborators to indulge in moving with pleasure in mind, enjoying the feeling of light on their skin, as a way to build a relationship with the light itself. We approached these experiments with curiosity into how we could isolate our bodies, while also finding multiple relationships and definitions of what light represented to us within the work. To treat light as something tangible and architectural, we used principles of Viewpoints in our experiments to get the dancers to consider their spatial relationships with each other, and to this malleable architecture. In doing this we discovered how to conceal and reveal part of our bodies to find new ways of abstracting them. Working with video as an additional light source, we used projections of thin lines and dots to create architecture that we could move with. This allowed the lighting design to have its own life, adding a sense of play and response to this relationship, as well as an implied agency in the way the lights are revealing and concealing us on stage.

## **Ensemble and Rhizomatic Thinking**

To work collectively is to work as a rhizome; a shared body, a collective being. To evoke rhizomatic thinking in this process is to evoke *A Thousand Plateaus*, widely referenced in various other texts central to this research. Exemplified in *Queer Ecologies*, Dianne Chisholm discusses how rhizomatic thinking is a way of “sideways knowing,” with desire as an “ontological, immanent force that connects us across species and biological strata” (Chisholm, 367). The dancers take on the role of the plants themselves in a metaphoric sense through the ways they move together on stage. At times we would isolate and zoom into this collective “plant” body in the form of solos and duets, to depict the ways the story on stage is not a singular, all-encompassing one, but one that shares a common ground between this group of people. This meant moving

with the intention to sense each other's presence- to listen deeply, the same way we would when we were engaging with our plants, but instead to attune to each other.



Figure 7. Rehearsal still of ensemble exploring the concept of “rot”



Figure 8. Still from opening scene of *Ultra Violets*

## Being Seen: Disco Aesthetics

This research hinges on the historic importance of discos as queer spaces—spaces for pleasure, for freedom, for becoming, and most importantly, for “being seen” (Echols, 41). Discos such as Studio 54 enabled the possibility of stepping into one’s own authenticity by allowing for the freedom to be seen, and furthermore, offered room for embracing and indulging in pleasure and sexuality by breaking conventions of “traditional” heteronormative dance styles expected in straight spaces (Lawrence). In examining the ways we are seen, and the ways we step into authenticity, it felt necessary to incorporate this history within the work. To honour the queers that came before us that created these spaces we identified and referenced the iconic dance moves that came from 1970’s disco movement in our choreography, deconstructing and embodying them with our own definitions of visibility. We allowed our movement research to be lead with joy, pleasure, and celebration to achieve this; to truly acknowledge the lineage of queer space is to harness the ways queer joy and pleasure are revolutionary forces (Maree Brown, 31)



**Figure 9.** Still from “disco promenade” scene, *Ultra Violets* 2023

# Design

## Set: Greenhouses and Queer Space

Influenced by the architectural and theoretical similarities between greenhouses and dance clubs, the set manifested from my research on queer spaces. In the “Queer Architecture” chapter on the Possibilities of Spaces, J. Cottrill notes that a queer space is: “a space of spectacle, consumption, dance, and obscenity” that is driven and created by the body- that queer bodies make and are made by the spaces that we are in (Cottrill, 362). I was taken by Cottrill’s writing on queer space:

“By its very nature, queer space is something that is not built, only implied, and usually invisible. It is altogether more ambivalent, open, self-critical or ironic, and ephemeral...Queer space, in other words, is a dark, nightlife where shadows and secrecy allow for the body to explore itself and others. A utopia of corporeal expression that bears no productive purpose.... There we can continually search within ourselves as we mirror ourselves in the world for that self that has body, a desire, a life... Queer space queers reality to produce a space to live (362).

I wanted to create a space that could transform; into a club, a greenhouse, a liminal space, a void, where this idea of queering reality could manifest. This was accomplished by creating the outline of a space using Astera lights- with no real walls or ceilings, the set could be reimagined to evoke these various places throughout the piece. Working with disco balls as a motif in our design, this element was also transposed onto the body through reflective mirror tiles placed on the dancers hands and spines, allowing them to have an active role in the way they could also embody this space, and transform it with light. Disco balls are treated as precious objects in the piece, as both an extension of the body and a metaphor for our own queerness. Furthermore, in making the wings of the stage visible we transform a “private” space into a public one to further honour my research on queer spaces- celebrating the spaces in the shadows, in the in-betweens, spaces found and made when structures in our cities did not welcome our kind of pleasure or intimacy. (Ingram, 95).



Figure 10. Still from *Ultra Violets*, 2023



Figure 11. Close up of planting troughs, where dancers plant their disco balls

## Light

In treating the lighting design as something tangible for the dancers to respond to and move within, heavy haze revealed new ways of seeing through volumetric lighting techniques. Haze transforms skinny, hard shutter cut lines into walls and pin spots into pillars, carving new architecture out of darkness. Additionally, projections were used as another lighting instrument to produce movable, highly specific shapes that both aided in isolating bodies on stage, and in creating more pronounced volumetric architecture for the dancers to move and interact with.

This temporary architecture makes the relationship to light and plant life a more tangible one, highlighting beams for our bodies to bend towards and hide behind. It dissipates, and we are left with the memory of the ways the light was able to take shape. This is speculative futurity- this is how we imagine new ways of living and seeing, by “making strange” what we put on stage.



**Figure 12. Dancing between pillars made by volumetric lighting**

To augment club lighting, LED fixtures were used to produce strobe effects and punchy, saturated colours. The colour palette is tied to the scientific research done on

how plants respond to various coloured lights. Exposure to red light for basil plants, for instance, increases the number and size of the leaves grown, while flashing light in various increments can also accelerate and heighten a plant's growth rate and process of photosynthesis (Patel, Radetsky, and Rea). The use of violets, reds, and natural sunlight tones alongside flashing lights are reminiscent of the hazy, saturated club environments our ensemble was familiar with, alluding to our scientific research while also bridging the design to the club aesthetics that center the piece overall.



**Figure 13. Red lighting used in “wilting, un-wilting” duet between Sydney Bluck and Desiree James**

The use of various jump cuts and black out cues create a dictation of pace and dramaturgy within the design. These are used to queer our sense of time, and to answer: *how can we control what the audience is seeing in a way that queers their perspectives of space and of our bodies; and in doing this, what are the new things we are trying to reveal?* Jump cuts force audiences to fill in the in-between moments for themselves, asking them to come to their own conclusions about what they're not seeing. At times, these jump cuts augment how the bodies on stage can be viewed as one singular being sharing an experience through replacing each other's positions on stage. At others, it focuses our attention on various parts of the body- the hands, the

spine, a stack of faces, paired with tight beams of light masking the rest of the body to isolate these images. The majority of our plant studies involved the simple act of paying attention to details. I wanted to evoke this same sense of close attention to the body using light. This is another way of playing with what is seen and unseen, controlling the gaze of the audience as if to say, *“this is us wanting to be seen, and this is how we will show it to you.”* We are giving the audience only as much as we will allow by cutting scenes short, or intentionally only lighting certain areas on stage, allowing the design to act as an extension of our own autonomy.



**Figure 14.** Isolation of tongues and mouths

## Sound

In composing the sound, sound designer Charlie Cooper and I identified the musical influences that resonated within this research, which ranged from environmental, atmospheric sounds to modern and iconic disco. We converged and deconstructed these influences to create something that was distinct, so that the sound could occupy its own space in the room. Following instincts to subvert narratives around plant and feminine subjectivity, we wanted our soundscape to be loud and harsh- the



opposite of what you'd expect a "plant show" to sound like. This also included the use of voice. He recorded the sound of my breath and whispers to add as textures within the work, helping fill the piece sonically with the idea of voice and the body.

Charlie and I engaged in experiments with plant made sounds to develop the aspects of the sound score. We went to Stanley Park with a contact mic, a zoom mic, and a hydrophone, and took field recordings of various plants we felt drawn to. We treated this as a nature walk, both taking the time to thank and appreciate the landscape and the plants we were working with, and used this as a chance to engage in deep listening. In addition, we would work in his home studio with our own houseplants and use the same recording devices to get sound samples of us digging and watering soil, and planting things.



**Figure 15.** Field image of contact microphone on a tree in Stanley Park

## **Voice and Text**

Disembodied voices are further layers of this world. Whispers and text are used to further augment the rhizome, and how this project was not meant to depict a singular experience, but rather one that attends to the interconnectedness beyond our ensemble and within our community. The heavy use of tongue imagery and opening of our mouths

is also meant to allude to voice; not the missing voice of plants, but rather the collective voicing of experience. Text was originally used as a narrative component, but as the piece progressed the need for text as a narrative framework felt like a limiting force. We instead opted to use text as a sonic texture, being selective with moments where we wanted to directly address the audience and have our voice heard clearly. The final, resonating text of the show reads:

*Let me tell you again how we celebrated the nights where we shook ourselves clean and left our grief on the dancefloor. How we let it land on the soil beneath our feet so we could plant it until it glistens in spring blooms. Let me tell you again about the nights where the dancefloor was all we had left, where this was all we had left. This.*



**Figure 16.** Close up of burying disco balls while final text plays

## Photosynthesis

To become through knowing and sharing experiences with a community of people is an expression of photosynthesis. In engaging in this pursuit of working with many bodies on stage, I also wanted to ensure I found ways of genuinely working alongside the community in this project. We put out a call for queer identifying movers and dancers to take part in a series of three research workshops, with the task to spend two hours together moving in ways that elicit queer joy. This also enabled me revisit and test my instincts around duets, somatic resonance, abstracting the body, and iconic disco movement with a larger group of people. To make space for community to come together in the rehearsal process, and on stage, was one of the most fulfilling aspects of this experience. Devising alongside this larger group was my way of embodying photosynthesis, a way of answering the questions of: *how can we show the ways we feel changed, and become, through meeting and knowing other people, through being with the community?* This resulted in an added fifteen people coming onto the project as an additional ensemble, including myself, to augment the raw, visceral qualities of a club crowd, while visualizing the collective experience of queer becoming. This was our way of creating space for extended visibility of our community on stage; if we were asking to be seen, we will show as many of us as possible.

The notion of interconnection is further highlighted when movements from the main ensemble show up in the larger ensemble. We see essences of each other in this large group, reminding audiences of previous images, eliciting their own sense of resonance as they witness these actions repeat themselves. In entering this space and seeing this process unfold, we want to give audiences the sense of collectivity; leaving them not with a depiction of what it means to experience queer joy or queer becoming on stage, but rather allow space for them to witness the nuances of being held by community. Together we made space and held space for each other to engage in our own becoming, and engage with this site of transformation, joy, and celebration.



**Figure 17. Still from “photosynthesis” section, featuring our additional ensemble**

## Reflections

Beyond our research, the heart of every decision made was anchored in one resonating question: does this ignite queer joy? Using this as a determining factor while designing and choreographing the work gave us a common ground to guide our intuition as we made discoveries around how we wanted the work to land. It is too often that stories around sapphic subjects center the very opposite. This work was created from the unapologetic inclination to indulge in the pleasure that comes from becoming, inviting audiences in to witness this, and relate to it for themselves.

This process and its result were an act of making space for queer community; a space for celebration and catharsis to take place, that began from our first day in the rehearsal room and remained after our final performance. There is a magic that happens when you fill a room with queer femmes and non-binary people, a shared understanding and unspoken acknowledgment of an intentional space for this community, our bodies and our voices. In this process of designing a space that figuratively expressed these connections between various sites for becoming, I had created a literal space where this took place for our ensemble. This transcended my research, and only highlights the importance of queer spaces in communities for becoming and collective care to occur. The process of becoming is one anyone can relate to. Yet, to queer this process is to acknowledge this state of becoming is nonlinear and not predetermined. It is a radical act of self that refutes heteronormativity, that stares boldly at the erotic, that comes from our own speculative futurity.

Elaine Miller wrote: “The body of a plant is never given in advance, it is not prescribed, the extent of its metamorphosis can never be predicted” (17). To hold and make space for us to grow into versions of ourselves and the futures we cannot predict is an act of perseverance. The process of becoming is one that is never finished. Still, in this acknowledgment and creation of space we make room for this process to unfold, fragmented and out of order, but unfold nevertheless. It makes space for the joy, catharsis, and grief to be seen. For dancing. For us to ask audiences to dance alongside us in our sacred sanctuary. For us come together and come undone, all at once, and celebrate the way the sound of our feet jumping together on the dancefloor will never cease to exist.



**Figure 18.** Image from final scene of *Ultra Violets*

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## Appendix A.

### Roots and Redefinitions

#### Roots: Plant Speculation and Queered Perspectives

Following Meeker and Szabari's *Radical Botany*, my fascination with thinking about plants as collaborators felt like a way of approaching yet another answer as to how plants ignite new ways of thinking about the world around us- and, how we are creating and making art. According to Meeker and Szabari, studies of plant life are what enable speculation, allowing us to speculate on new visions for the future, for the ways we relate to our environment, and to each other. This concept of speculation served as a foundational component to how I wanted to approach the way I treated design and space, and the way I wanted to work with lighting in the piece. To find ways to abstract our perceptions of space and transform the stage using lighting and haze felt like a way of harnessing this idea of speculation within the work, treating it as a way of visualizing and imagining new worlds and futures, while also giving my ensemble new ways of engaging with the stage in various planes.

To deepen this understanding, I turned to queer ecology. Queer ecology destabilizes the heteronormative binaries we use to look at our relationship to the environmental world, our positions within it, and our understandings of the way nature operates. Within the work itself I wanted to allude to histories surrounding various plants, such as lavender, violets, and pansies, which were once symbols of hate towards queer communities and have since been taken back and turned into symbols of resistance, love, and reclamation. To attend to the agency and subversive nature of this research, it was important for us to incorporate the grotesque in some of the images we put on stage to negate the stereotypical "pretty," feminine narratives that philosophically surround feminine and queer subjects. We reject the docile, submissive comparisons to plants and instead embrace their agency as speculative subjects with our tongues out, our bodies thrashing, and dirt on our hands. With this said, working solely with other queer and femme identifying artists within this ensemble felt like a necessity to the way this work needed to be created and cared for; and our ensemble reflected that.



In tandem with this study of queer history and spaces, we felt we needed to define what “queer” and “queer becoming” meant for us as a collective. I lead the group through various writing exercises and conversations around what we felt was true to our own definitions of queerness, and queer joy. We asked questions such as; *what are things that feel authentic to us, and what feels like queer joy? What does queer mean to us individually, outside of existing definitions?*

Linking this to our plant research, our answers lead us to examine the ways disco and club culture emphasize pleasure and the erotic. An aspect of one of the ways we wanted to “be seen” on stage was to view sexuality with a female gaze; rather than refute or de-sexualize the work, I instead wanted to incorporate earnest sapphic intimacy on stage, something that is seldomly seen in film and performance from this perspective. Our treatment of sexuality and proximity in the work comes from the act of simply being: rather than trying to present ideas of what queer intimacy looked like, the fragments we show center touch and proximity, while also sinking into the harsher, more erotic images, highlighting sweat on our skin, the wiping of spit, the undersides of our tongues. Many moments of the show ended up depicting this intimacy behind our greenhouse wall through frosted fabric. In partially obscuring these images, we felt like this was our way of keeping some of this intimacy for ourselves, rather than for the consumption of an audience.

## **Germination**

Germination, being the first stage of life when a seed begins to grow, is defined as a process of something coming into existence and developing; or in our metaphor for queer becoming, the first stance we take in stepping into our own authenticity. For us, this meant identifying a reclamation of our agency as queer and femme individuals, refusing the existing stereotypes around the softness and delicate sensibilities tied to feminine subjects and plants. The show opens revealing this process of growth; we begin in the dark, finding our light and finding each other in the process. In this discovery of self, we must break the molds of our prescribed structures, and our view on heteronormative binaries and beliefs. To depict this, the beginning of this show is immediately followed with a bright, loud, fast paced series of jump cuts that juxtapose the delicate, slow start of our first scene. We wanted to augment the process of growth and becoming in a similar way to the time lapse videos we watched in our research-

speeding through images the events that would happen later in the performance. At the heart of this stage, our depictions of germination center the joy and celebration that come with the beginning of this process, as seen in their movement quality and usage of bright, colourful lighting design.

## **Rot: cyclical processes of wilting and un-wilting**

Amidst this pleasure, there is also the necessary grief and loss that come with shedding old forms of the self. We viewed rot in this piece as part of a cycle, not as a death, but as an opportunity for regeneration. When a log rots, new life springs from this decaying life form. Rot for us is just as generative as it is necessary, but to celebrate becoming means also celebrating this aspect of loss. The queer experience that is coming out, finding community, and defining the self is not a flowery, easy process; it is an aspect of becoming that can be steeped in grief, rage catharsis. The use of rot in this work allowed us to find a roughness in our movement, defining the harsher edges of the images we were putting on stage. The middle section of the show, which we titled, “wilting, un-wilting” was our way of embodying the action of rotting and regrowing, while also depicting what it feels like to both become undone and come together through kinship and community. There are aspects of the choreography where we catch each other and check in throughout this section, redefining touch and proximity as an act of understanding. Despite this process occurring in their individual bodies, the act of catching and resetting each other’s bodies was our way of expressing how a collective sense of care and mutual understanding of this deeply private and individual process is made smoother by our gestures of care towards one another. This was also our way of acknowledging how dance spaces can become sites for processing grief as a community, and to experience catharsis and transformation collectively.

*To celebrate deep loss, change, and the deaths of our old selves enables the births of new ones. This work views rot as part of that celebration. To rot is to regrow. To wilt is to be unwilted when you fall into the arms of kindred spirits.*



**Figure A.1** Anna and Aisha catching Charlotte in “wilting, un-wilting” scene

## Appendix B.

### Second Nature: Plants, Speculative Thinking, and Notions of Becoming

Emanuele Coccia writes, “plants embody the most direct, elementary connection that life can establish with the world... plants occupy the fundamental position from which we should analyze all elements of life” (Coccia, 2). In the extensive writing and research that has been done on plant life, Coccia’s sentiment has rung true throughout history as philosophers, artists, and scientists alike have engaged in a deep study of plants. From proving the aliveness and agency of plants in post humanist theory to cinema and literature on plant horror, plants wield the power to both allow us to imagine and shape our futures, and further, speculate on ourselves and our relationality to modernity, and the systems we partake in. This fundamental position of analysis serves as the driving force as to how we too may come to best understand and analyze our own ideas of subjectivity, agency, and our bodies. In particular, this thinking with plants resonates in the studies of feminist theory and subjectivity, and further in queer ecology and queer theory on becoming. In writing as early as Aristotle’s, discourse around marginalized subjects such as feminine subjects and queer subjects have been comparatively likened to the discourse of plants; “the substance of a plant, like that of any (female) being, cannot move, or move beyond, the ontological status assigned to it. Once and for all. It is not capable of any less or any more” (Miller, 88). The feminine and queer subject within literature and cinema has since continued to be placed in a stereotypically submissive, docile, passive role that this quote articulates, despite the history of botany being linked to otherwise powerful symbols of knowledge and resistance. It is in following this idea of using plants as speculative figures that we are able to imagine and enact subversive, powerful rewritings of these narratives, and furthermore articulate how the process of “becoming” can occur through plant-based thinking.

In many ways, we can consider plants as ideal subjects in discourse around becoming. As put by Elaine Miller in *The Vegetative Soul*, “the body of a plant is never given in advance, it is not prescribed, the extent of its metamorphosis can never be predicted” (Miller, 12). In their own process of becoming, plants do not need to speculate

on their potentials for metamorphosis; they simply become, and most notably, the become “nonetheless” regardless of their environmental or external conditions. In this way, their potential to become is limitless. In applying this principal to our own notions of becoming, plants can assist us in better understanding, and by extension, imagining, our own desires and processes of becoming, and of redefining our own subjectivities. In examining this relationship to plant life and the ways we can apply plant thinking within our own lives, we must ask: what does it really mean to speculate with plants, and furthermore to speculate on ourselves, our bodies, and our relationships to the world, considering that plants do not speculate for themselves at all?

To begin, it must first be defined that despite their assumed passivity, plants are in fact speculative, mobilizing agents that have shaped modernity, cultivated creative and industrial advancements, and historically have severed as symbols of rebellion, futurity, and persistence. This is ascertained by Meeker and Szabaris text, *Radical Botany*, in which they outline both a historical (albeit, primarily European) framework of how plants have acted as speculative subjects within art and science, and in particular touches on how thinking with plants has resonated in the study of feminine subjectivity, queer ecology, and post humanist theory. This resonance, mentioned in their final chapter “becoming nonetheless” touches on Deleuze and Guttari’s core concepts of becoming, which opens our own considerations to how plants can assist in speculating on one’s own subversion or becoming for historically marginalized groups, namely feminine and queer subjects. Here, I will examine how these philosophies of becoming and plant study serve as potential sites for speculation, and to that end, achieved subversions of subjectivity through plant-based thinking.

According to Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, thinking collaboratively with plants has proven to be a worthy process, one that continues to enrich and further our own understandings of futurity and societal advancement. They write, “vegetality is driving the production of technology, scientific knowledge, and new media forms. This is radical botany, in which plants are not just objects of manipulation but participants in the effort to imagine new worlds and to envision new futures. Within this framework, the plant becomes capable of unleashing speculative energies for envisioning and indeed participating in the world as other than it may appear to us” (4). The close study of plant life is indeed a mobilizing pursuit for scientists, philosophers, and artists alike in this sense, as they allow us to envision new futures for ourselves, and our world. What this

text does successfully is both outline the ways in which plants have always served as this mobilizing source of inspiration and speculation, calling our attention to these life forms that we may otherwise forget to notice in our everyday lives, even as we consume them. This call to attention of plant life and shift into “plant thinking,” which is thinking with plants as collaborators in both speculation and action, is summarized by artist Dennis DeHart in his essay and accompanying art exhibit, *Slow Life*, which encompasses a study of plant data visualization and visual compositions created around plant study. DeHart writes; “the truth is, plants, humans, and most other life-forms are inextricably intertwined, locked in a dynamic, co-dependent struggle for survival. It is in our own self-interest to pay them more attention” (DeHart, 3). In paying this attention, we may envision first and foremost better ways we are able to connect with our environment and with one another, as well as ourselves. This idea is expanded on in Meeker and Szabari’s text, in which they write, “plants do not represent an opportunity for escape from exploitation or a direct or unproblematic outlet for utopian fantasy. Rather, they oblige us to come to terms with our own vulnerability in the face of processes of ecological, social, political, and intellectual change, and, often, with our profound, complex dependence on the very forms of life that we are least inclined (or simply unable) to perceive” (Meeker and Szabari, 9). This is the exacting power of plants acting as co-participants in speculative processes, including processes of self-determination. It goes without question the relationship we have to plants is a deeply entwined one already- and so, this too should enable us to apply this same speculative reasoning to our perceptions of becoming and the body.

In thinking of becoming with plants in mind, we can turn to Donna Haraway’s concepts on sympoiesis, and post humanist theory that places importance away from humans and onto animals, plants, and matter. This way of thinking about becoming through plant studies is articulated by Haraway’s definition of sympoiesis, which she defines as “making with... Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (Haraway 58). This term can be applied to the ways we may engage in creation and collaboration with non-human subjects such as plants or animals within an artistic process, and further, in processes of our own metamorphosis. According to Haraway, this process is “a co-creation with reciprocating energies. Performers and artists let go of preconceived notions of what things are supposed to be able to do, and open up to what things evoke, allowing things to matter; subject and object require each

other in unexcepted collaboration and combination in order to move forward in complexity...they become-with each other or not at all" (Haraway, 4). This post humanist approach to becoming places an inherent importance on the consideration of plants within this theoretical framework as a means to surpass rudimentary notions of the contemporary "self". This line of thinking is imperative in understanding the ways we may learn to think with plants as a means of becoming and reveals a holistic relationship that may be fostered with the natural world in doing so. We can think further about this idea of plant vitality in looking at Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*. Though her writing does not explicitly make mention of plant studies, much of her notions of material vitality and on post humanist thought resonate here. Bennett describes becoming in connection to the natural world as "an active becoming, a creative *not-quite-human force capable of producing the new*, buzzes within the history of the term nature. This vital materiality congeals into bodies, bodies that seek to persevere or prolong their run" (Bennett, 118). These "bodies," which for Bennett apply to both human and non-human forms and here can be applied to the body of plants, relates to Bennett's main argument that philosophy must consider the forces of non-human entities as active participants in events, and specifically draws from the philosophies of Spinoza. She continues to say that these "bodies" are "conatus-driven bodies, to enhance their vitality, form alliances with other bodies... The process of collaboration and contestation between bodies is not random or unstructured" (118). Here she introduces the idea of conatus as self-preservation, "not in the liberal individualistic sense, but rather as the actualization of one's essence, that is to say, of one's ontological drive to become. This is neither an automatic nor an intrinsically harmonious process, insofar as it involves interconnection with other forces and consequently also conflicts and clashes" (118). This conatus, defined as a willingness to live - or, as put by Meeker and Szabari, the notion of "becoming nonetheless" is a stubborn persistence that marginalized subjects know well. Much like plants, there is a stubborn, inevitable desire to grow, or rather to "become" despite challenges dictated by one's physical environment. It is therefore clear that if we are to best understand this interconnectedness Bennett speaks of when thinking about plants and the world at large, we must examine the ways we relate to one another, and accept the fact that we are assemblages of the things, people, and environment around us that all contribute to our drive to become. To best speculate new ways of becoming through plant thinking is therefore to acknowledge this entangled relationship we have with non-human forms, and their agency and ability to influence us.

The concept of becoming and plant thinking must also consider Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatic thinking, and their writing on "becoming plant" and "becoming woman" in their text, *A Thousand Plateaus*, which has influenced writings of various feminist and queer theorists. As put by Meeker and Szabari, there is a long tradition of identifying "feminine, non-Western, and queer bodies with those of plants (or violently placing them into the garden of culture where they may be "cultivated" (174). This tradition that points directly to philosophies and writing that liken feminine subjects to the gentle nature of plants, and the longstanding history of violence against these marginalized groups, is contrasted by an opposite narrative around masculine subjects. In contrast, these narratives often directly oppose those of "masculine" counterparts, who are attributed in writing with an implied agency and dominance (Miller, 78). To think of this connection between subjectivity of feminine and masculine subjects is to apply Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic reasoning, in the sense that the existence of this opposition cannot be ignored in our analysis of subjectivity, and how we may speculate beyond these dated contractions of feminine and masculine subjects using plant thinking. As put by Meeker and Szabari in reference to De Beauvoir, "the task of becoming woman and that of becoming plant are historically linked in ways that we should not overlook, for the plant has long been identified with the feminine body and has just as regularly been exploited, naturalized, and subjected to social and (bio)political control" (173). Here we look to the concept of what it means to "become plant," one that is seen widely in film and literature, where feminine subjects, sometimes quite literally, look to vegetal modes of being as escape from or rebellion against societal norms placed onto women. Science fiction genres and their inherent speculative nature exact the ways plants link to "materialist, feminist, and queer tradition that prioritizes literature and art as spaces of metamorphic experimentation in which identities are in flux and marginalized subject positions may be fore-grounded" (Meeker, Szabari, 91). In using our own bodies as sites of understanding and becoming, queer and feminine subjects are able to construct new subjectivities for themselves that reframe or subvert existing narratives. In this we see the agency of the so-called passive figure of plants, and in turn, the power they enable queer, feminine, and marginalized persons within current systems of oppression.

Returning to *The Vegetative Soul*, philosophical frameworks around vegetal life and the likening of feminine subjectivity to that of plant subjectivity show how plant



studies and their correlation to philosophies of becoming are further understood. In particular we can look at how Goethe's writing on metamorphosis is applied to the concept of becoming. Goethe describes plants as having open ended, unpredictable futures, and claims that all things in nature work incessantly upon each other as a "a collection of vital forces that mutually transform one another (Miller, 59). This process of formation in many ways makes plants idyllic subjects of becoming when compared to animal or human forms, providing a deeper understanding of individuation as something beyond the corporeal body. In many ways, this aligns with the defining characteristics of efflorescence, which as Miller describes, is "a figure that implies metamorphosis and indefinite individuation, a blossoming or blooming that cannot be bound within traditional boundaries of embodiment of philosophical discourse... a sexed subject, a multiple subject, a subject in becoming" (189). This indefinite quality of plant growth is unique to that of animals and humans in the sense that it will continue to persevere and is never fully completed until the moment of its death; it continues to grow despite the occurrence of any mutilation or harm, offering indefinite potential for growth. Though this comparison of plant metamorphosis and subjectivity is not uncommon, the use of this comparison "etches an alterity into identity" (Miller, 85). This etching of alterity into identity is an inherent queer way of thinking about becoming, and subjectivity. To make things queer, as Sara Ahmed notes in her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, is to "disturb the order of things" and a "making strange" of our perspectives (Ahmed, 161). In shifting the perspectives of ourselves, and further in the ways we view plants within society and our own lives, we untap this same potential that plants wield to become something beyond the prescribed subjectivities attributed to us. In altering our perspectives, and reaching a state of disorientation, as Ahmed puts it, we can achieve a subversion of these preconceptions that resonates as queerness- and the freedom to become within that. Queerness and queer culture, in its multiplicity of definitions, has looked to plants historically as symbols of queer resistance and desire. This mention of desire as an underlying principle that indeed does contribute to concepts of becoming and metamorphosis lies in principles of queer ecology, that denote queer desire as a driving force for envisioning change (Erickson, Mortimer-Sandilands, 36). Queer ecology recognizes desire and the erotic as devalued topics in western culture parallel the devaluations of women and nature, and notes two key points: that "queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature, and sexuality" and that queer ecology highlights the existing links within

queer theory to the understanding that our desires and pleasures are significantly shaped by nature and our external environments (Erickson, Mortimer-Sandilands, 191). This dichotomy only further proves the way plant studies and plant-based thinking are intrinsically linked to queerness and feminine redefinition of subjectivity, and the implicit subversion of these societal dichotomies that ignites our desire to speculate new methods of existing within, and against them.

It should also be noted that the relationship between plants and queer history is one that cannot be ignored when considering how we are thinking with plants in this framework. The history of certain plants to be linked to sapphic roots and queer evolution such as lavender is exemplary here when we consider moments in history such as the “lavender scare” and lavender menace feminist movement in the 1970’s. Plants within a queer history are inherently political symbols, and further prove the symbolic power nature holds in shaping and imagining futures, and in particular, queer futures. This is further articulated in the study of queer ecology, where queer theorists traverse the connections between nature and queer theory. This key component of queer ecology reinforces that despite being seen as deviant throughout much of history in the Western world, gender and sexual fluidity show up in nature in many forms. With this, one can consider queerness as inherently natural and part of the natural world, and queerness can offer a “different paradigm for human relationships and our relationship with the natural world” (Erickson, Mortimer-Sandilands, 118). This speculation of new relationships to the natural world is achieved through a fostered relationship to plants is precisely why thinking with plants in a collaborative framework to envision such changes is deeply important. Through this inspiration we gain from plants to apply concepts of metamorphosis, growth, and change within our own lives, it is indeed certain that thinking with plants is a step towards personal and societal revolution.

What we can therefore conclude from these given examples is that at the center of both the study of plants and the study of becoming, the defining characteristic that ties these two subjects together perhaps most notably is the presence of pleasure and joy. The joy to be found, and cherished, within this relationship of looking at plants is also a joy of becoming. It is a found sense of freedom that comes from the potential to speculate new versions of oneself in an act of becoming that is perhaps never fully finished. What is achieved in using plants within a speculative framework is a newfound principal of becoming that is grounded in this very joy of metamorphosis plants endure in

the first place. In this line of thinking we are not only connecting back to ourselves in ways that speak to our fundamental interconnectedness to plant life, but expanding outwards from it- placing our own roots in what it means to become something more, something new, and something beyond oneself. If the possibilities of plant growth are unlimited, then thinking with plants as collaborators in our own speculations of ourselves and our world offer us the same limitless potential plants possess.

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## Appendix C.

### Documentation

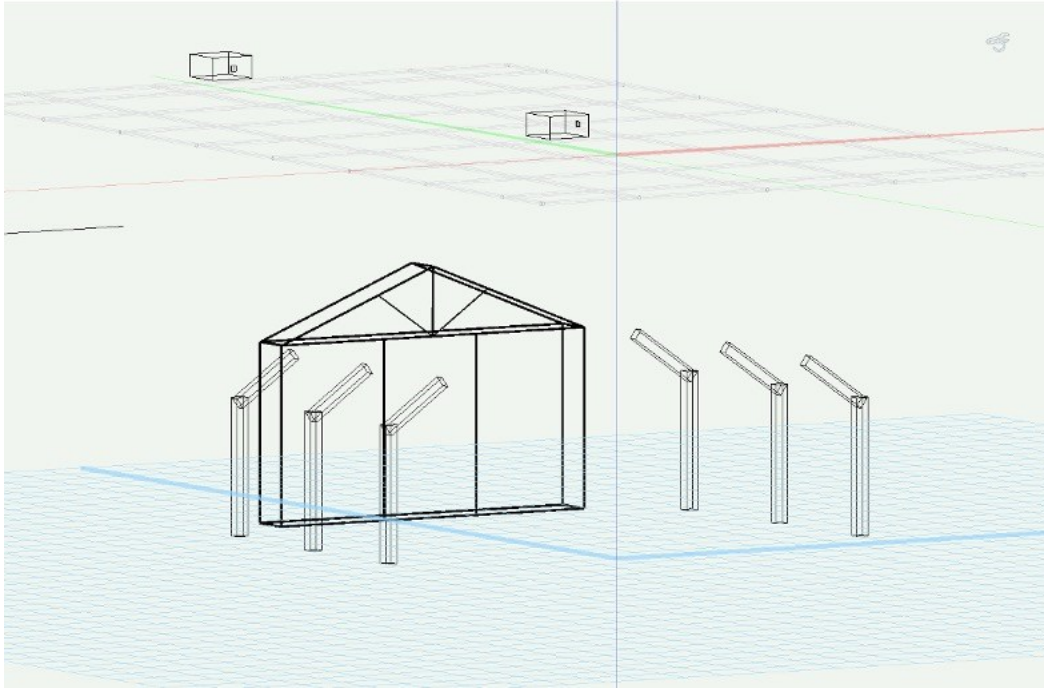


Figure C.1 Initial set drafting featuring Astera tubes to augment “grow” lights