

On her 30th birthday in New York City in 1987, a woman called Penelope was given a leaf of a plant, the *Ephiphyllum oxypetalum* or Queen of the Night. The person who gave it to her implanted in her mind that it was special (“eine besondere Pflanze”) and should only be given to special people. The Queen of the Night must be admired, that person said. The plant soon grew very large, so when Penelope moved to Berlin in 1993, she left the plant where it was and took just one of its leaves with her.

That leaf grew into a new plant, the one silhouetted here. Three of its leaves were later given to friends, who in turn passed on cuttings to other friends. In this way, human by human, building by building, district by district, the plant has been spreading across Berlin ever since.

The Queen of the Night is a spineless epiphytic cactus originally native to Central and northern South America that grows non-parasitically on trees and moves through the jungle in a time-lapse dance. Sexually self-sterile, it needs to attract other creatures to help it pollinate. The Queen blooms from dusk till dawn for a single night only and often no more than once a year, giving off an especially powerful, heady scent to attract sphinx moths and nectar bats in the dark.

Since these long-tongued creatures are not native to Berlin, the housebound Queen has no option but to reproduce asexually here, relying on the legend of her nocturnal charms to entice ever more humans into adopting a clone. The infrequency of her blossoms also works wonders in an anthropocentric environment, maximizing desire and value in perfect alignment with the principle of scarcity.



We can only speculate as to how actively the plant uses its looks and (al)chemical talents to stir human desire. But evolution is forever evolving and, after all, a meagre 200 of the 300,000 edible plant species have successfully tamed us to cultivate them almost exclusively.

This map connects people in Berlin who have become entangled in relationships with genetic copies of the same morphologically primitive plant, which for most of the year is all stem and root – stems that also flatten out to resemble leaves. But the relationships only truly blossom when the plant itself blossoms. Having reached puberty, as long as there is sufficient light and not an excess of water, the more attention the plant gets, it seems, the more flowers it produces. From the human perspective the appreciation feels mutual. There is much talking to the plant. Parties are held in honour of its blooming.



One man looked after his plant for nine years without it ever producing a flower. When he got married and there were two people to care for it, the plant blossomed twice in a year. Perhaps though, the Queen is also competing for attention, as it must in its natural habitat.

Several people found that over the years, the plant would time its flowering to coincide ever more precisely with their birthdays. Another plant suddenly produced an unprecedented display of nine blossoms, just days before the woman in the house gave birth to her first child.

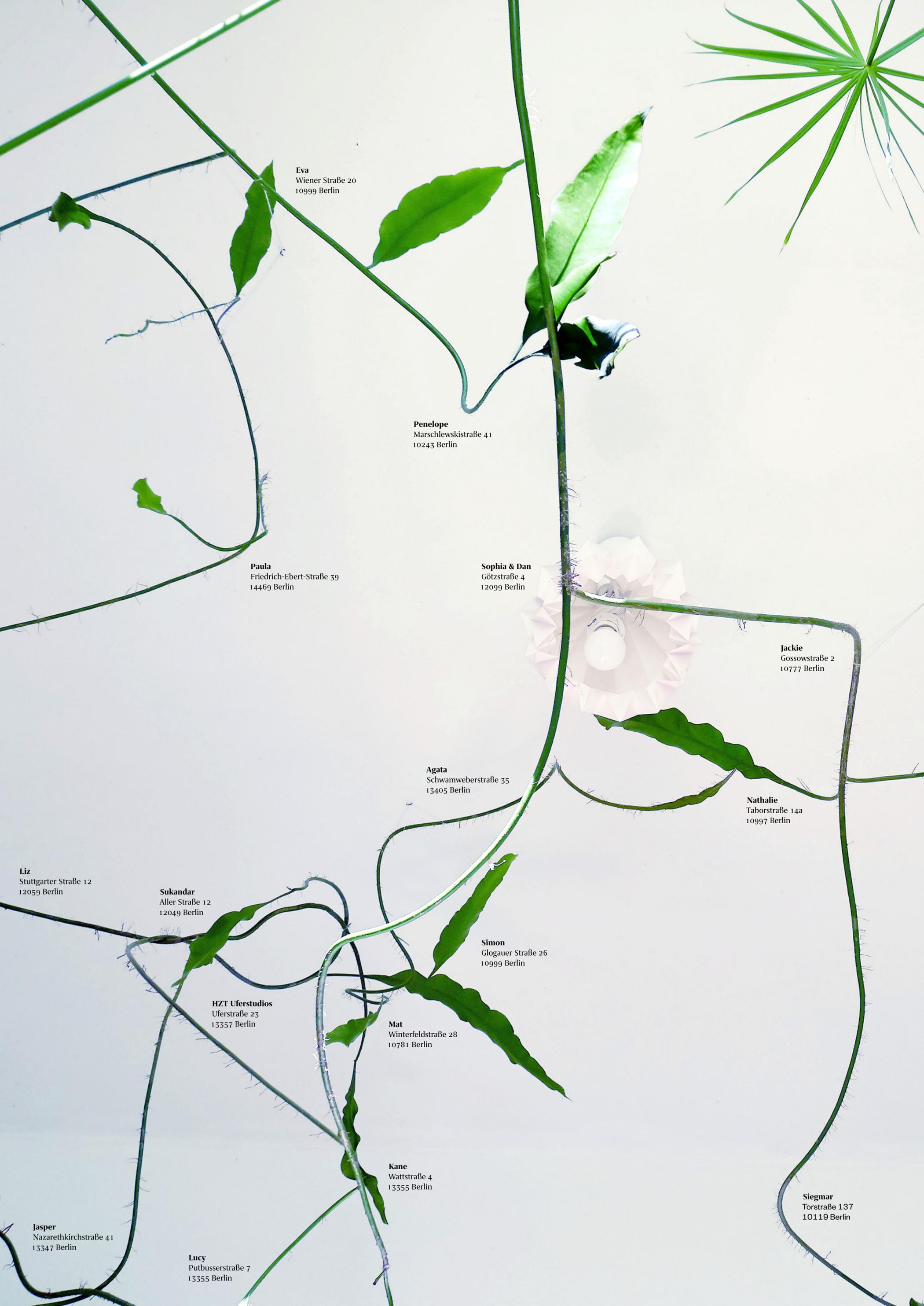
There is plenty of build-up to the flowering event. From a section of stem that looks like a leaf, a dark pink bud forms like a tiny outstretched hand. Growing steadily over the next two weeks, it morphs into a sharp phallic hook, softens its long neck into a deep and graceful curve, inhales deeply and swells, loosening its tendrils

and composing the chemical love song that will be sent floating through the night. On the final afternoon the white tips part and the bud puffs open in a mass of swan-like feathers, spilling ever more intricate floral appendages and yellow pollen dust. By dawn the flower is spent.

These questions remain: If plants have at least as many senses as human beings and also have a memory, can this plant perhaps sense that it is not attracting any pollinators, that no moths or bats have dipped their tongues inside its flowers and taken with them a dusting of pollen? And if it were to be re-united with its clones that have spread across Berlin, would there be some hormonal sense of kinship with those who share its fate?



## In the Canopy of Clones



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**Sophia & Dan**  
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**Jackie**  
Gossowstraße 2  
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**Agata**  
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