

# WOMEN, PLANTS AND MONSTERS

Jana Kukaine, Assistant Professor and Lead Researcher in Riga Stradins University

I met the artist Eva Vēvere in 2015 when I was working on the manuscript for the book *Lovely Mothers. Woman. Body. Subjectivity*. At the time I was searching for contemporary art works in Latvia, which touch upon the subject of giving birth – the deeply transformative, bodily and affectively, as well as intellectually profound creation. Eva's installation *Nine Things* was one of the rare examples that I managed to find back then. It was made in 2012 for the exhibition *Timeline Hotel* as part of the *Survival Kit 4* festival and was on view in the Sigulda Castle and Manor House complex. *Nine Things* melded the characteristics of conceptual art with a documentary approach and autobiographical elements. Although the artist's poetically laconic expression was reserved, it was precise and honest. The invisibility of the act of giving birth in Latvian visual art is symptomatic (I describe the reasons in the book); tellingly, since 2015 the Latvian art scene has been added to by only a few new works that interpret this female experience embraced by images, words and energy flows.

The feminist aspect in Eva Vēvere's works is enacted viscerally, in other words, as a mode of attention, observation and situated knowledge nurtured by the embodied experience of everyday life. In her works, we encounter a moving figure of a woman, located against the background of rich textures. Her silhouette, however, is often floated and blurred, for example, in the works *Grid 9* (2014), *Circa* (2017) and *Reverse* (2017). In these works, a woman balances on the edge of visibility and anonymity; the artist conceals, deceives and covers her identity. The surrounding environment and situation frequently contravene the stereotypical depiction of femininity, questioning and expanding the boundaries of womanhood. At other times, the female figure is quite specific and ordinary. In the work *Flowers for Mothers* from 2017, the artist studies the everyday lives of mothers and acknowledges their needs, which in the prevailing discourses of motherhood are often downplayed. In the 2018 exhibition *Glandula Mammarum* Eva's installation Collection focuses on the phenomenon of pin-up girls – her intonation is both ironically amused and feministically charged as she juxtaposes the heteronormative desire inscribed by the male gaze with the subversive temporality of the menstrual cycle. The photographic installation *CLOSE-UP*, a work created in collaboration with the photographer Valdis Jansons for the exhibition *Wool and Silk. The New Erotic* (at the Latvian Museum of Photography, 2018), instead of affirming a power relationship, reclaims the act of looking by offering a feminist gaze which is tender and tactile, almost like a caress.

In recent years, plant motifs have featured increasingly in Eva's works. The excess, chaotic nature and unpredictability of the vegetal world coexist with the artist's attention to detail and her striving to find balance and controlled disorder. The turn to plants, which in recent decades signify the development of humanities and social sciences, contemplates the cultural blindness and disregard of plants – we have become accustomed to view nature as means to an end, for example, as a resource for economic growth, medicinal use, source of inspiration for art, place of relaxation for the mind, and promulgator of ideas in the languages of art and poetry. Retreating from the anthropocentric perspective, contemporary research reveals the complex structures, communication and cohabitation strategies of plants. Plant-based research facilitates the understanding, as well as new ways of experiencing the human-plant relationality, as well as encourages to learn from plants more sustainable models of building and maintaining communities. The traditions of ecofeminist thinking add to the ongoing debate a perspective on gender, while the alliance of women and plants is also viable in art. These interrogations mobilise imagination, innovation, artistic materials and approaches to demonstrate novel ways of coexisting, collaborating and mutual care inspired by thinking and living with plants.

From the vegetal perspective, I would like to highlight the project *Herbal Monster*, a series of photographs jointly created by Eva and Valdis Jansons, which came to be during a residency at *Fiskars* in Finland in 2015. The project highlighted the gesture of hospitality and trust: during the residency, the artist invited inhabitants of the village to be photographed with their favourite plant. The outcome was a series of black and white double portraits in which the boundary between the human and plant bodies is relative and questionable. The interpretation of the work may be aided by Aristotle's idea of the soul, which reflects the hierarchy of living organisms. The most primitive beings are plants, they grow and wither. They are followed by animals, which are able to move and feel. Only the crown of creation – human beings – are able to think. The capacity of the vegetative part of the human soul is responsible for the simplest functions: eating and reproduction. Plant philosopher Michael Marder preserves Aristotle's system, but confers another explanation to it: in human beings, this part of the plant is that which is embodied and mortal, rooted in this world, forming relationships and sharing with other people. Thus, the plant-self is of great importance. Emanuele Coccia calls plant life the most intensive and radical form of life, whereas philosopher and anthropologist Natasha Myers asserts that we need to take plants seriously and collaborate with them as a precondition for overcoming the climate crisis and preserving life on this planet.

"I grow" not "I think" is the ultimate statement of existence, as it attests to the vitality and liveability, according to Catriona Sandilands, one of the most visible plant philosophers. Thinking and being with plants outline new ecological kinships, where close and bodily interaction with the vegetal world overshadows and expands the human horizon. When the classic human sign of difference and imagined privilege, i.e. rationality, is no longer important, monsters and all kinds of outcasts can strive. *Herbal Monster* focuses on the vegetative part of the human soul, visualising the identity of *planthropos*, which exceeds the usual view of

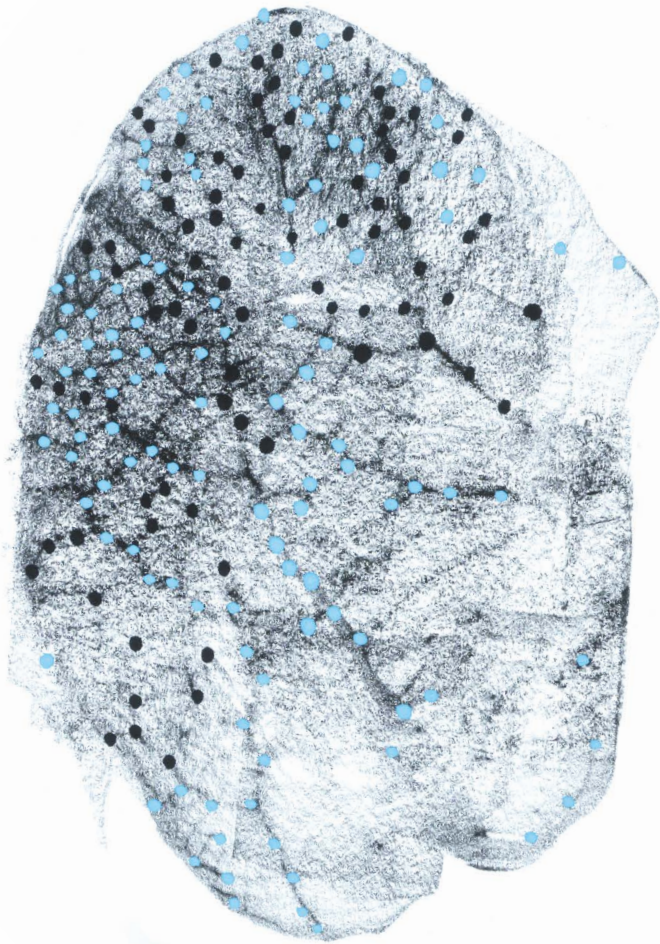
the human being as an individual, self-sufficient and autonomous being, detached from the environment and relationships. The series of photographs reveals a hybrid form of coexistence and communication, illuminating a visceral, almost mystical, connection to and interdependence with plants. Its aesthetic cultivation has the power to create sustainable and responsible forms of care, subjectivity and imagination, enriching and strengthening human relationships with the more-than-human world.

The videos *Reverse*, *Grid 9* and *Herbal Monster* mentioned in the article can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/evaverere>

This article was written under the auspices of the project "RSU internal and RSU with LSPA external consolidation", No.5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/005 Postdoctoral Grant "Vegetal Agency and Contemporary Art: Towards Sustainable Relationships with a More-Than-Human World", No. RSU-PG-2024/1-0003









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