

Fafaya Mogensen
in conversation with
Alberte Agerskov

The exhibition *Silphiofera* reflects on the ephemeral—flowers as forces in nature that expires. By using materials meant to pass—flour and water—Alberte Agerskov creates concrete forms out of that which is meant to return to the ground. Her work does what art does best: Offer an immediate jolt of both recognition and disorientation. I'm tempted to say that her works are arresting or captivating, but then the involuntary connotations of those adjectives don't seem to fit; better to say that Alberte Agerskov creates works that hold you. Works that give pause and invite for reflection – not necessarily like looking in a mirror, but very much like catching someone else, someone you care for. - FM

Alberte Agerskov in conversation with Fafaya Mogensen

FM: Dear Alberte,

It's interesting, thinking of the separation or parallel between female and flower and how It is a construction that feels simultaneously oppressive, protective, and weirdly liberating?

Separation has always been an issue for me: separating night from day, masculine from feminine, me from you and root from stem. I know where to start and never where to end. I guess your exhibition, *Silphiofera* somehow inhabits that space in between; the root and the stem. As you've mentioned in previous dialogues, the exhibition title *Silphiofera* is the name of a region near the Gulf of Syrtis where the flower silphium once lived. I'm curious what is your relationship to separations?

AA: Dearest Fafaya,

Chemical meetings, attraction by smell

**Breathe-in deeply when I give you a hug*

Or meeting through sound waves

**Your heart drops into your gut and fills you up*

I think of the seed as a carrier of the root and the stem. But a seed only does what a seed does when in contact with water - nothing is really what it seems unless differences meet and intra-act, across and through what is separated. It is difficult to measure, decipher or even define something solemnly by sight. We need to integrate and trust our perceptions through all our senses; smell, sound, taste, and touch. This way, we will naturally break down binaries (or separations), because your hand will tell you that the stem is ultra-intra-connected with the root. Just as your nose will tell you that the person in front of you is not only standing in front of you, but is already *in you*.

FM: What a lovely way to start a conversation, insisting that we are part of the same entity. First, I want to say that I was so happy to discuss the question of femininity with you, but maybe there are some questions that we didn't talk about... a bit tougher... more difficult. I've been thinking a lot about the role I play in the consumption of "the feminine". I mean, you and I both try to refuse and complicate the way femininity heavily hinges on representational strategies within certain aspects of the arts. I'm wondering if this is linked to a specific European position?

AA: Women and female energies around the world have long been, and are still compared with flowers. I've experienced innumerable parallels because of similarities such as

(AA) fertility, fragility or beauty.

**You bloomed by the age of adolescence. Then, right after your blush, flush flowering you were de-flowered, plucked, you were no more at all. But coming up, weighing upon you, voilà: soon, again you are a flower, and you'll be "drying out" by the age of menopause, withering into a bread crumb.*

Silphium is the first plant to be documented extinct as a consequence of human use. If we linger here, in the *Silphiofera*, where the flower used to grow wild in Libya, this ancient myth might just tell us about bodies resisting cultivation and colonisation: The "European", or occidental position in development and use of contraception, from the obfuscated history of the Silphium plant till today - is hard to escape. In the expanded discourses of the feminine, I believe intersectionality is key.

The pharmaceutical mass movements weigh differently upon each person, depending on one's background. This perhaps makes it a hard topic for different feminists to agree on, resulting in a stagnation on the topic. Nevertheless I think we need to not accept that different kind of plants and female bodies are firmly placed under regulations in regards to identity, sexuality and fertility.

y trying to expose the many comparisons between ideas of the feminine and ideas of floral control and cultivation, I seek to show that both the female and the flowering plants, are much more complex than the clichés that have been cultivated throughout time. None of the "two" can or should be obtained within those narrow definitions.

(For well documented visual parallels, please see Nobuyoshi Araki's examples, just search for "Nobuyoshi Araki orchid vagina dry").²

FM: Right, and today the comparison is almost used as a colloquialism. It's interesting, how you mention Nobuyoshi Araki's documented examples – as if the flower and female is identical. It made me think of a quote by Gertrude Stein from 1913³. She writes "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" The meaning often attributed this ubiquitous idiom is that a thing is identical with itself, as in the logical law of identity. Stein's rose, however, refers to an empty signifier. She later explained that:

"when the language was new, as was for example Homer, the poet could use the name of the thing and the thing was there"

But over time, I think each successive representation loses its original referent. In context of the flower, what you're suggesting is that it's not referring only to the flower itself but instead as you say, the feminine. What are your thoughts around where identity sits within your practice and this exact body of work?

AA: Yes, I can really relate to that. As I travel and live between cultures and countries, my practice deals a lot with where language connotes or connects bodies and myths of diverse cultural and material territories.

Identity has always been a way for me to slip in and out of contexts and situations, chameleon-like. That's why it hit me hard when reading Laura Tripaldi's thoughts and research on contraception⁴. I'd been trying to address the theme in my practice for a while, but what I hadn't really figured was how deep these problematics are residing within my own tissue. Reading Tripaldi's texts, I started crying - at once in great relief, but mostly realising how hard it is to grow one's own identity. Female bodies have been a

² Araki, Nobuyoshi. Nobuyoshi Araki (b. 1940) was a pivotal figure within contemporary Japanese photography. His works are known worldwide and often employ sexual subject matter. In the series referenced, Nobuyoshi Araki uses an orchid as an allegory for a vagina.
³ Stein, Gertrude. Stein was an American novelist, poet and playwright. She saw the way symbolism can weigh down literature and artistic process, by locking the artist into certain choices dictated by cultural meaning. The mantra-like phrase "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" stems from her poem, Sacred Emily published in 1913.
⁴ Tripaldi, Laura. Tripaldi is a writer and researcher working at the intersection of science, technology, philosophy, and gender studies.

(AA) major subject for scientific and legislative surveillance and control, and I think we're still in a process of unveiling the implications within our society today.

In my practice I still feel like a chameleon. I flee separations, trying to create a space of fluent and fluctuous identities, hard to coin and capture, but easy to feel. I believe identity should be explored through liquids, hormones and what we eat.

**When you eat flour-rich foods late at night, in those gross cookies you love, you often get agitated and ugly. Your sweat smells bad, and your tears are less salty. I prefer you crisp and awake, flour-less.*

This is why you can wake up next to your lover, without no longer knowing them - or rather no longer knowing yourself. In one of those mornings, it's extra easy to fall, lean or be pushed into prefabbed, readymade definitions.

FM: FM: I agree, your artistic practice is quite chameleon-like in its ability to assume different forms. The potential, perhaps lies in the fact that you can escape a primary identity, refuse to stick to a single sense of self. Where do you think the potential lies?

AA: Paradoxically, looking closer at flowers, their profound complexity might help us unravel fixed categories of our own. I mean - why not give into the similarities between us and other species? In all honesty, who has not been flattered by being compared to the beauty of a flower - fragile and fragrant?

I guess it's liberating for most of us to sometimes let go of claustrophobic norms and live in the glory of one's favourite orchid, however it smells and folds. What doesn't quite fit to me though, is that the flower has been attributed to one gender only, clinging and holding onto an idea of the girl and the woman as helpless and fragile - as if women and plants are expected to follow the often-outdated rules of the country that happens to name the earth, they respectively grow from, in order to bloom, reproduce and wither 'perfectly'.

This omnipresent need for *perfection* - the plant being cut down to grow better, the crown of the tree sculpted for the perfect body, or the genes of the rose modified, for it to grow in blues⁵. Ideas of the feminine is often in similar ways expected to cosmetically groom, being sculpted, cut down and trimmed to fit.

But the orchid, the rose, the lily and the daffodil, amongst so many others are actually hermaphroditic, *perfect*, or bisexual flowers, able to auto-fertilitate. In an episode of *General Ecology*⁶, a 2019 initiative of Serpentine Galleries, Emanuelle Coccia states how the biological meaning of sex is the fact that most individuals (human and more-than human), in order to maintain life, need to mix themselves with other(s). That sex is not just about fertility and reproduction, but more generally, is an exchange of identity and material with other things or beings. In that sense, sex is evidencing that life can happen only through amalgamating in differences, by mixing identities, or, as Coccia puts it, by *throwing away identities*.

If we really want to draw a parallel between human and plant, let's start by the fact that the flower is not actually the woman, but the sexual organ(s) of the plant, quite literally.

FM: I think about your work, *Rhizomatic Correspondence Piece: extract 1 (RCP:EI)* the one with the choir of voices, in the garden. There is often something relational in your work. It seems to me, that this work questions how one's own body, one's "I," exists in relation to "nature", especially as rendered through artificial means, such as contraceptives. Can you expand a bit more on your thoughts on the project?

AA: Sure, *RCP:EI*, is a first extraction from a sound-based work that I hope to let grow in collaboration with others over the next years. The work tries to re-orient and potentialise the flower allegory by using the root-like, spontaneous and uncontrollable networks that plants and flowers continuously create, to actually connect femmes. It started by me sowing a seed, sharing a personal experience about my mind-body being controlled by a system and its pre-defined medical technologies. Firstly, I extended an invitation and shared a story of mine to women close to me. Second, I asked them to continue the chain and send their own thoughts to others, growing the conversation through intimate stories across, or *underneath* the crisp, ephemeral crust of country borders. In *RCP:EI* the choir, ocean-like correspondence will be installed within the garden of the exhibition space.

In *RCP:EI* intersectionality is key, and listening is key. I therefore ask everyone who participates to listen fully to the story they receive from someone else, even if the story is in a mother tongue different from their own. There's something about listening to laughs, hesitations and rhythms in the voice of someone exhaling a language you don't understand, which connects you to their message.

FM: It's tempting to call your work in the garden a performance or at least a performative landscape. In this exhibition the work, *RCP:EI*, inhabits the garden as a site-specific installation in which a multitude of voices are playing out loud, hereby creating an invisible architecture, that navigates the viewer towards obstacles (maybe we encounter voices or languages foreign to us) or even a sense of recognition.

The alienation of opaque narratives in the work, seem to function as an un/doing of orientations in defining a purpose or result. When walking around the garden, one gets a sense of dense references, fragmented associations and meanings. Nobody expects to put the fragments together, and I think you are aware of that. It's almost like a methodology of disorientation heard through the female experience. To use your own metaphor of the voices being a sea, I think the many identities may or may not be woven together and given order, indexed to references or associations. But as long as they float as they do here in your garden, it will be hard to swim against their intuition.