

## THE ECOLOGIES OF CARE AND HEALING

### Research text by Valentina Iancu

The exhibition “Ecologies of Care and Healing”, initiated by Gabriela Mateescu, joins contemporary art to architectural and botanical nature research projects. This collaboratively curated construction guides a visual, poetic and at the same time practical journey into the complexity of man’s relationship with planetary flora. Starting from the nourishing, healing, magical, mythical attributes, symbolic imagination or use in different aspects of life, from clothing, architecture, or pharmaceuticals, the exhibition is divided into four sections, inspired by pop culture, folk culture, or common understanding as follows: useful, poisonous, aphrodisiac and medicinal plants. Current botanical taxonomies are mixed in this visual micro-anthropology of the vegetation of the past and present. The exhibition becomes a space for reflection, learning and revelation of man’s relationship with vegetal nature. What is nature? How do we think about botanical nature? What is the place of plants in our lives? What role do we play in their lives? “Ecologies of Care and Healing” stems from a series of questions concerning the relationship between man and vegetation, which are derived from the homonymy of the word care.

The way we relate and interact with plants is marked by the nature/culture opposition that places man as the “measure of all things” outside nature, at the top of the hierarchy of all species. In the usual definitions, nature is imagined as *a matter* imbued with specifically feminine attributes: mysterious, maternal, nurturing, ever-changing, unstable, and chaotic. The word “nature” in Romanian comes from Latin, from the word “natura”, derived from the past participle of the verb “nascere” (to give birth), i.e. “nato”. This root is common to the word used for “nature” in most languages spoken in Europe. The imagination of nature in European culture is based on the capacity for rebirth every spring. The collective body of vegetation is symbolically seen in the paradigm of regeneration, which places death in the continuum of life and creates the illusion of immortality. Thus, in the Anthropocene, nature is an inexhaustible raw material. Nature’s life cycles are dependent on a multitude of environmental factors. Today, massive pollution of the planet’s soil and water, deforestation, intensive agriculture, loss of biodiversity, species extinction, climate change, and other human actions are making it harder than ever to regenerate natural worlds. Michael Marder, one of Europe’s most active contemporary naturalist philosophers, remarks: “any future philosophy of nature must carry the realization of environmental finitude as a birthmark on the body of its thought.” Marder argues for the urgent need to change the way we relate to nature and argues, like the American philosopher Timothy Morton, for a radical change in thinking: “the very idea of *nature*, which many hold dear, will have to wither away into an *ecological* state of human society. Strange as it may sound, the idea of nature stands in the way of ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art.”

The guided incursion of artists, architects and botanists into the complexity of human relations with plant nature unveils the mechanisms by which flora, in the service of humanity, is imagined,

used, consumed and destroyed. Plants provide the breath of the ecosystem of which we are a part of. This living shell of the earth's crust has been reduced to the status of a resource that is freely exploited for human survival. The utility of plants concerns all aspects of human life, from food, clothing, shelter, physical and mental health. The plants that cover and feed us, breathe with us or delight our eyes are understood primarily as *raw materials*. The section on utilitarian plants highlights aspects of living with botanical nature, from the study of agricultural or gardening practices to formal, aesthetic observation. Living with botanical nature is indispensable to the life of all species, while human consumption habits jeopardize plant life cycles. Beginning with Neolithic agriculture, Timothy Morton examines how the relationship between humans and nature has moved in the direction of domestication and exploitation, underlying today's advanced state of destruction. In all sections of the exhibition, the subject is approached in a multifaceted and interdisciplinary way. The combination of works follows principles inspired by attributes associated with nature over time, namely: stylistic diversity, accommodation of difference, chaos, or some maternal qualities.

From the garden in a rural household, found in the paintings of Horia Bernea or Hortensia Mi Kafchin, to Ana Maria Micu's personal garden in her apartment block, real landscape gardening projects by Nicolas Triboi or imagined by artists Andreea Medar and Mălina Ionescu or urban corporate gardens, the section dedicated to useful plants brings to the gallery space various ways of living with botanical nature. While the section dedicated to useful plants remains in the actual register, the part of the exhibition dedicated to poisonous, toxic plants, so-called harmful to man, introduces us into a surreal, symbolic universe, inspired by the mostly psychotropic, hallucinogenic character associated with poisoning phenomena. This category of plants has an ambiguous status: all plants are useful in helping to clean the air. However, some weeds, for example allergy-causing plants with no other useful qualities for humans, are subject to eradication programs (especially in urban environments). Roberta Curcă brings into the exhibition space a discussion about the very plant for which the citizens of Bucharest sign a petition every year: the ragweed.

From the class of poisonous plants, the best known are probably narcotics and hallucinogens, to which researcher Andrei Oișteanu has devoted his study entitled "Narcotics in Romanian Culture: History, Religion and Literature". According to Oișteanu, voluntary poisoning by plants has been used in Romania for ritualic or creative purposes since prehistoric times. The process of anthropomorphizing plants, found in works by Katja Lee Eliad and Roman Tolici, is part of the perception distortion register.

The chapter on ritual plants continues and expands on poisonous plants by exploring how plants are used in various rituals and magical practices. Herbal medicine and holistic treatments often use poisonous plants: the difference between a remedy and a poison is only the amount ingested. In Romania, one of the best-known poisonous plants used in rituals throughout the country is Belladonna. Diana Matilda Crișan and Marta Mattioli visually explore this plant invested with occult properties and integrated into magical practices. Belladonna is one of the plants believed to have been used by witches to make potions that helped them fly. Scientifically known as *Atropa Belladonna*, the plant is

popularly known in Romania as the Devil's Weed, the Wolf's Cherry, or the Empress of the Forest. A tall herbaceous plant from the dark mountain forests, Belladonna has been used in folk medicine to treat fever, coughs, renal colic, or epileptic seizures, and has also been taken up by the pharmaceutical industry and used to this day. Belladonna cuts across all categories in the exhibition: it is a poisonous plant, used in both herbal and classical medicine, used in love rituals, and ingested as an aphrodisiac. The plant contains Atropine, a substance known today in ophthalmology for its ability to dilate the pupil, an old custom used by women for seduction. The inclusion of Belladonna in the section dedicated to ceremonial plants was justified by the existence of several texts dedicated to the use of the plant in spells, divination, or black magic. In a study dedicated to "The Cult of Belladonna in Romania", Mircea Eliade observes: "Of all the plants that the witches, girls and women of Romania, seek for their magical and medicinal virtues, there is none whose ritual of harvesting involves so many dramatic elements as the Belladonna. The technique of digging it up is stranger and more complex than that of any herb, even essential in witchcraft and folk medicine. Only the mysterious operations carried out to pluck the plant out of the ground and preserve very ancient rituals alone are accurate. Moreover, for the harvesting of other magical or medicinal plants, a large number of elements have been borrowed from the ritual of the Belladonna."

Among ritual herbs, a special category is represented by the remedies used throughout the ages in love, more precisely in support of human sexuality. The practice of using plants to stimulate the senses through smell, taste, or aesthetic qualities has existed since ancient times. Aphrodisiac plants are used to increase libido, treat impotence, "frigidity", or enhance seduction. This category can create a romantic, sensual atmosphere, inspired by the imagery of the goddess of beauty and love, Aphrodite. Livia Greaca and Miron Schmückle follow the sensual morphology of plants: their works seduce the eye into the universe of shapes and colors of the floral world. The flower represents the sexual organ of plants, an organ that seduces beyond the limits of its species. Beguiled, the human gaze has taken from the floral universe aesthetics, shapes, textures, and chromatic subtleties and has allowed itself to be seduced into imagining symbolic, metaphorical, or allegorical worlds. Ciprian Mureşan brings up the myth of the laurel tree, the legend of the transformation of the nymph Daphne into a laurel, to escape the unwanted love of the god Apollo. The myth narrated by the Greek poet Parthenius is known from Roman times, namely from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This story contains some of the elements in which woman and nature are envisioned together. Nature and woman have been imagined in tandem, they have a body of discursive characteristics in common that place them in opposition to man, unpredictable, unstable, and wild, subject to domination, subjugation, control, administration, and exploitation. The mythology derived from the regenerative and nurturing qualities of women and nature, rooted in a teleological understanding of the biological, co-creates a layered and complex set of arguments that today justify the domination of both women and nature in neoliberal societies. The transformation into a tree as a liberating gesture from patriarchal oppression tells us that for a new definition of nature, a start may be to analyze the complexity of the entanglements imagined so far.

The exhibition "Ecologies of Care and Healing" operates with vague, intersecting and overlapping categories. From the pleasure of confusion, a playful dialogue is maintained with common thinking

about plants, which becomes the benchmark and constant in this visual anthropology of vegetation, chaotic, polyphonic, polysemantic, and also political. Classical botanical taxonomies are based on plant morphology, without taking into account their integration into human life. “Ecologies of Care and Healing” raises a series of questions with the hope that its viewers will continue to imagine answers and potential reshaping of nature for an ecological state of humanity.

Translated by Liliana Popescu