

Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky's Leaves of Grass

by Alex Klein

In the earliest photographic images produced in the nineteenth century one finds a fondness for subjects that appear to meditate on the material properties and metaphoric implications of photography itself. Jacques-Louis Daguerre's plaster casts, for example, are themselves "positive" impressions from "negative" molds. Likewise, *A Scene in a Library* by William Henry Fox Talbot points to photography's relationship to the book form, or his renderings of plants, literally photo-chemical machines that convert carbon dioxide to sugar with the aid of sunlight. In this way, these early photographic images encode a kind of self-reflexivity that underscores the very conditions of the medium. Although the resulting compositions, often of static objects, were most likely determined by the conventions prescribed by classical still lifes and the technological constraints of lengthy exposure times, we might also interpret them as crucial, and prophetic, reflections on archivization, replication, and circulation.

Alongside these pioneering investigations stands Anna Atkins (1799–1871) and her cyanotype prints of algae, which inspire their own strand of "photo" chemical inquiry and mark one of the earliest endeavors within photographic self-publishing. Photographic historian Larry J. Schaaf credits Atkins as both the first woman photographer and as the first person to print and publish a photographically illustrated book. Although Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* is often assumed to be the first mass-produced book of photographs, Atkins' self-published *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* in fact predates Talbot's iconic publication. Working in a domestic setting and often alongside her scientist father, Atkins wanted to create a detailed illustrated compendium to William Harvey's imageless 1841 *Manual of British Algae*. As Schaaf notes, unlike Talbot, whose primary agenda was to promote the wide dissemination of the photographic process and its application in book form, Atkins' goal was to produce a comprehensive volume of reproducible images with the greatest veracity for the purpose of scientific study and general edification, all while maintaining a keen formal sensibility.

“Impressions” aptly describes the cyanotype process Atkins used, first developed by Sir John Herschel in 1842. Although cyanotypes failed to find a permanent place within botanical representation, their formal properties and relatively immediate effects had a great appeal to other disciplines, such as in engineering, where the cyanotype process was still popular until recently in the form of blueprints. Cyanotypes are similar to the method of making a photogram in a darkroom (we might be reminded here of James Welling’s *Flowers* series), and better known today not only for their use in architectural renderings, but as the commercially available Sunprints marketed to children. Perhaps as close as one can get to the early advertisements of “sun-drawn images,” cyanotypes are produced by placing an object directly onto the surface of chemically coated paper, burning the image by exposing it to the sun, and subsequently “developing” it in water. Because they are cameraless and negativeless photographs, each print is necessarily an original. Thus, Atkins’ book required that she carefully make repeated prints from her individual specimens resulting in both formal and physical variations in the imprints made from her fragile seaweed arrangements. Over the course of ten years Atkins produced at least twelve copies of *British Algae* in various states of finish. Completed in 1853 and comprised of handwritten plates, custom seaweed type, and as many as 400 unique cyanotype prints, the three volume set stands as a remarkable achievement.

Just two years later, in 1855, Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) self-published his collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, a book that he would go on to revise and reprint throughout the course of his life. In addition to self-financing the first edition he also did much of the typesetting, having apprenticed for a printer in his youth and founded the newspaper the *Long Islander*, where he served as “publisher, editor, pressman, distributor and even provided home delivery.” Intensely personal, *Leaves of Grass* elicits the lived experience of Americans during a pivotal moment in the formation of U.S. national identity and amid fundamental political and socioeconomic change. And yet the book is perhaps best remembered for its wholehearted embrace of the senses and unbridled enthusiasm for the natural world amidst the shift to an increasingly industrialized landscape. A modern text of its time, Whitman’s verse thus reflected a certain ambivalence towards the technological advances afoot, with Whitman warning in one passage: “Poet! beware lest

your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things, [and not from] contact with real things themselves.”

Despite the skepticism of this statement, Whitman’s engagement with photography was both intimate and profound, leaving behind dozens upon dozens of photographic portraits in which he posed both alone and with friends and rumored lovers. Famously, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* does not bear its author’s name. Instead, Whitman included an engraved reproduction of a daguerreotype of himself, stating: “The contents of the book form a daguerreotype of [my] inner being, and the title page bears a representation of its physical tabernacle.” Whitman continued to rework and republish *Leaves of Grass* throughout his life, and as Leo Braudy has noted, with each subsequent and expanded edition, “Whitman’s image often kept pace, getting older and presented often in tandem with a script-like signature, printed as if personally autographed,” thus making each edition appear to live and breathe along with its author.

It is precisely the personal involvement with the natural world embodied in both Atkins' and Whitman’s engagement with photography and the book form that drives Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky to produce her most recent body of work, reproduced here as *39 Gräser*. For Kovacovsky, 1855 marks another important marker in the trajectory mapped so far with the publication of *Physiotypia Plantarum Austriacarum* by paleobotanist Constantin von Ettingshausen and botanist Alois Pokorny. This multi-volume publication depicts hundreds of plant specimens from the Austro-Hungarian territory using the Naturselbstdruck or nature printing process developed in Austria in 1850. The Naturselbstdruck process produced an image at the actual size of the plant material, however, with far greater detail than could have been hoped for in the cyanotype process. In addition to reproducing a specimen at actual size, this process allowed one to transfer the very surface onto paper by means of a press, which Kovacovsky describes as a kind of early form of scanning. Using what she considers a modern-day correlative to these print-making processes, Kovacovsky employs a photocopy machine to scan her grass arrangements and output them as inkjet prints on standard, off-the-shelf A4 paper in ten different pastel hues. Kovacovsky revels in a kind of freedom bound by the constraints of

the standardized page and replication process, and because the grasses are always placed at random and output on different colors, each print is necessarily unique despite the book's mass-produced materials.

Although Kovacovsky's project is situated squarely within the twenty-first century, the work channels the sensuous nature and exuberance of some of the nineteenth century projects examined so far. Always displayed in an intimate book or portfolio form, the work invites her viewers to become readers as they physically flip through the prints on differently colored backgrounds, observing the interplay of natural forms from page to page. As with Atkins and Whitman, one simultaneously registers the bluntness of depiction and a romantic sensibility—in *39 Gräser* Kovacovsky literally presents us with her “leaves of grass.” Pressed against the glass and scanned, the plants are suspended in an empty field, thus allowing the reader to focus on minute individual details. The title “39 Grasses,” which refers the actual number of grasses depicted in the portfolio, avoids a layer of sentimentalism or nostalgia due to its straightforward presentation and use of current technology. And as with the varied number of prints included in *British Algae*, Kovacosky's grass books vary in number such as *339 Gräser*, *403 Gräser*, *370 Gräser*, each titled to reflect the number of grasses represented, one can't help to also be reminded of the presentation of information favored by Conceptual artist in publications from the 1960s and 1970s.

Unlike the scientific, illustrative intention of a project like *British Algae*, Kovacovsky's project perhaps bears a closer resemblance to some of Atkins' later collaborative works, in which formal considerations rather than taxonomic order appear to have been the driving force. Raised in a bucolic setting on a farm in Switzerland, Kovacovsky brings to her work a sense of childhood wonderment and discovery, recounting “I have always been fascinated by flowers, and since my childhood it is almost impossible for me to go into nature without collecting flowers, leaves and straws of grass that I find interesting.” This autobiographical dimension is emphasized by the way the grasses are selected. While Atkins relied on both her own expeditions and on the kindness of other plant enthusiasts to provide her with her materials, the grasses reproduced in Kovacovsky's

“Flora” are collected on her travels and harvested from the environs around her studio and in the forests and fields surrounding her mother’s home in Switzerland. Reminiscent of the kind of collections of leaves and shells one assembles as a child, the “leaves” of Kovacovsky’s grass project creates a kind of map or record of her encounters with the natural world. As she writes, “Nature helps me to orientate myself and shows me the progress of the year. I find inspiration in nature’s biological methods, growth, appearance and its various symbolic meanings. I think about it as a system, a work in progress.”

It is significant that Kovacovsky chooses to focus her attention on grass as opposed to other natural forms. Unburdened by the sentimental connotations of flowers, or the metaphoric significance of leaves, grass is a mundane plant that recedes into the background or grows in unwanted spaces. Simple in form yet surprisingly diverse, Kovacovsky’s minimal compositions seem to dance across the page. In one sense a playful riff on Atkins’ self-published algae compendium, the *Gräser* project forefronts a kind of sensitivity to lived experience through an attention to the natural world. Inciting readers to look anew, we are suddenly cognizant of the green expanse beneath our feet.