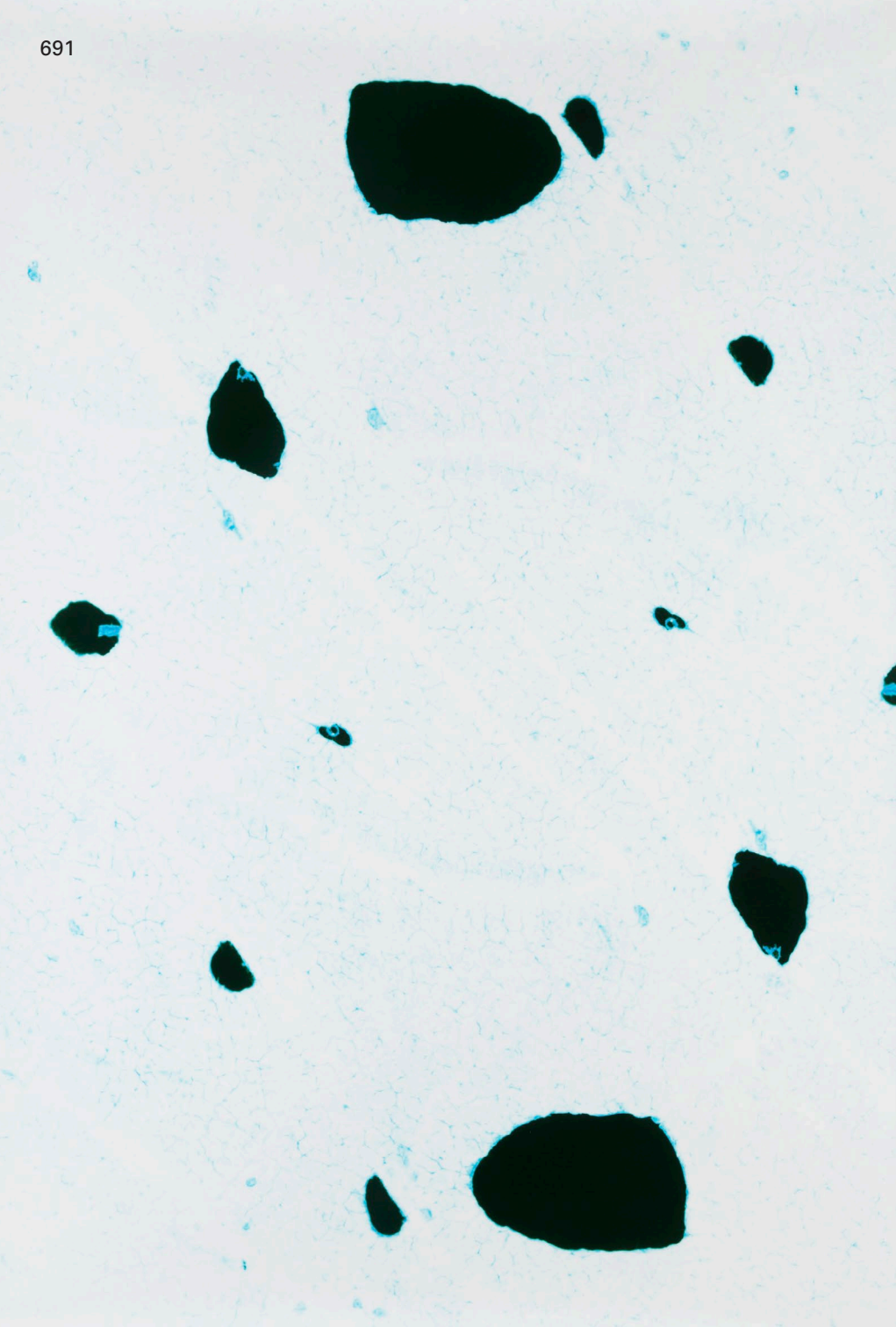


Feeding on Light
Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky



Shapes of Breathing

Taco Hidde Bakker



Remember the leaves from childhood. Creating heaps of autumn leaves on the parking lot, which we would race through on our bicycles as fast as we could. The trees lining the lane stood firm with a self-evident presence, as if asserting their longevity. The beech right across from my room was red-leaved while the others, mostly alder trees, were as green as green can get. Throughout the seasons the leaves' colour palette subtly changed before in late autumn they became a locus of play. Another leaf-related childhood memory: In elementary school we used leaves as stamps and stencils to create paintings. Suddenly their limited autumn palette could be enriched with the mixtures of colours from the paintbox. We would overlay leaves and play with negative and positive space, while the lines of the veins automatically added detail. Along with painted handprints, the ease and joy of printing with leaves may be among the most archaic image-making.

I had largely forgotten about this rich world connected to something as deceptively simple as a leaf until I became acquainted with the work of Eva-Fiore Kovacovsky, especially her extensive series of leaf prints, reproductions of which have been collected in this book. In her colourful prints, Kovacovsky performs the magic of photosynthesis in a different key. In a sort of reenactment of the photosynthetic process, in the darkroom she experiments with photographic colour filters, multiple exposures, and the luminosity scales of electric light sources to arrive at a wide variety of leaf compositions.

We're surrounded by leaves but seem to pass them by without giving them much notice, except perhaps in autumn when the foliage changes from lush green to a broader colour palette, of which bright yellow and red stand out. The green of the plant is an expression of

¹
See Nicholas Harberd, *Seed to Seed: The Secret Life of Plants*, Bloomsbury, London, 2006.

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See for example Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Polity, Oxford, 2018, and Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013. A detailed account of the inner workings of leaves, including a chapter on leaves in art, can be found in David Lee, *Nature's Fabric: Leaves in Science and Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017.

³
Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, 2013, 56.

photosynthesis, the leaves' process of turning sunlight into sugars to feed the plant, as is the metamorphosis of colour in the autumn when the power of sunlight diminishes. Green, surprisingly, is a minority colour in Kovacovsky's leaf prints.

Once I rediscovered the marvel that is the leaf, I found it hard to conceive of it as an entity that can be separated from the world. The leaf is a necessary precondition for the many breathing lifeforms on Earth. It enables an atmosphere with sufficient oxygen to breathe, besides being a major food source for animals and humans alike. Plants grow through very subtle reactions to their environments as these grow along with them. Plant and *Umwelt* (the environment, the *world around*) are united, according to plant biologist Nicholas Harberd in *Seed to Seed: The Secret Life of Plants*.¹ This unity is of such fundamental importance that Harberd has only one word to describe his feelings about it: *sacredness*. This awe has largely disappeared in the mechanical worldview that predominates today, but we would do well to reevaluate our relationship to plants. Fortunately, in recent years increased attention has been paid to plants (trees included), from popular accounts by scientists and philosophers musing about the meaning of plants to visual artists showing us the splendour and importance of the vegetal world.²

For Kovacovsky there's nothing merely fashionable about this, as she grew up in a household where the sacredness of plants was a given. Throughout her artistic practice she has consistently worked with fruits, seeds, and leaves. Through various elementary photographic techniques, from photograms to contact prints, but also frottage and plaster reproductions, her works show the elegant beauty of these small fruits of nature upon which life depends. Rather than showing a distant depiction of a plant, a seed, or a leaf, her work proposes a direct "object-image" relationship—although I would urge botanists and philosophers to consider plants *subjects*. As Robin Wall Kimmerer notes, "In every sentence language reminds us of our kinship with the whole living world." Plants are living beings infusing the world with spirit. "Isn't that exactly what it means to be," Kimmerer wonders, "to have the breath of life within, to be an offspring of creation?"³



↑ Fossilised cycad leaf

Kovacovsky recounted a telling childhood memory to me: "I always took many natural treasures home after having spent time in the forests and fields. I also pressed plants in books. I became fascinated by the shapes they got after having been dried flat. They were the same plants, yet had transformed into something else by becoming two-dimensional. They had transformed from plants into images." In a way, the leaf is the ultimate proto-image, the image that precedes all other images. Long before early humans painted the silhouettes of animals and hands on cave walls, plants and insects were fossilised or left their imprints. Beautiful specimens of fossilised cycad leaves, for example, that probably date back to the Jurassic era have been found in Yorkshire, England. There was no artist involved, of course, but I find it tempting to see these visual survivors of the ages as images or even artworks. Images that come about without the work of human hands, as the Shroud of Turin is alleged to have, were called *acheiropoieta* by the medieval Greeks.

Kovacovsky's twenty-first-century "leaf fossils" didn't come about without the intervention of human hands, yet they retain something of the directness of an imprint. For the smaller contact prints, Kovacovsky placed leaves directly onto light-sensitive paper before exposing it to light. The larger images are one step removed from direct contact and are not photograms in the technical sense but, as Kovacovsky calls them, 'leaf negative prints'. These arose from the arranging of leaves within the negative holder of a photographic projector. The leaves were then projected onto large sheets of photographic paper (some of which were cut by hand, hence the "imperfections" in the edges).

Kovacovsky uses colour printing filters to hallucinatory effect. Each exposure of her projection technique makes possible only one colour constellation. Most images in the series are multiple exposures based on moving the paper or the leaves and changing the relation of the colour filters between exposures. Different colours are introduced with every exposure. If one exposure projects yellow (visible inside the holes or around the outer edges of the leaves) and another projects blue, a spectrum of yellow, blue and green

See for example Martin Barnes' book *Cameraless Photography*, Thames & Hudson and V&A Publishing, London, 2018, for many examples of photograms and other photographs made without a camera, including ancient specimens of leaf photograms, from the days before the advent of modern photography up to the present.

will emerge depending on where different exposures overlap. Colours are also impacted by the length of the exposure. A dominant colour like magenta, for example, requires shorter exposure times.

A complex amalgam arises in the interweaving of primary and complementary colours, as well as an ingenious interplay between positive and negative space by virtue of the holes bugs have eaten into the leaves. This touches on another important theme of this series: nutrition. "Plants," as geobiologist Hope Jahren writes, "are the only things in the universe that can make sugar out of nonliving inorganic matter. All the sugar that you have ever eaten was first made within a leaf." Without a constant supply of glucose to our brains, we will die; therefore, as Jahren beautifully phrases it, "at this very moment, within the synapses of your brain, leaves are fueling thoughts of leaves."⁴

The patterns created by the bugs as well as Kovacovsky's intuitive arrangements of leaves, always done without a light source, open up space for happenstance. Because colour paper is sensitive to the full colour spectrum visible to the human eye, it is not possible to employ any light source (compared to the red light of the darkroom used in black-and-white photography). Orientation must be haptic. Kovacovsky blindly moves the paper for the different exposures and the wheels of the adjustable colour filters ("the colour head") to change the composition of the image. In a sense, the holes function as "lenses" through which the light passes, "making empty space visible," as Kovacovsky told me. She also links the holes to our ecosystem's life cycles, as well as to loss and emptiness.

Even though the series *Feeding on Light* may not be photograms in the strict sense of the word, they are photographic through and through, down to the visible veins of the leaves and the hidden and tremendously complex workings of photosynthesis. The process that Kovacovsky has developed for this series is a form of visual *photosynesthesia*. These images tap into the longstanding traditions of the direct use of natural materials in photography, especially plants and leaves, and alternative photographic processes that can be grouped under the header "cameraless photography."⁵



¹ Experts don't agree as to whether this leaf image, made by placing a leaf on light-sensitive paper and exposing it to sunlight, was made by Thomas Wedgwood (1771–1805) in the 1790s or by Sarah Anne Bright (1793–1866) in the 1830s.

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See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/book> for more information.

What may be one of the oldest surviving photographs (technically a photogram, or direct imprint) is of a leaf. This brownish-yellowish image of a single leaf, whose tree-shaped veins are clearly visible, was originally ascribed to the photographic pioneer Thomas Wedgwood, but it was later suggested that it might originate from Sarah Anne Bright (1793–1866) in the 1830s. A more famous example is the "photogrammatic" series of blueprints of British algae made by Anna Atkins, who also happens to have published the first photobook ever using these images. What sets Kovacovsky's work apart from most of these "incunables" of photographic history is her use of many different colours and the various compositions involving multiple, often overlapping leaves.

Kovacovsky's working title for this book was *Blätterbuch*, which is striking for multiple reasons. Literally it means "Book of Leaves," but its double-edged meaning gets lost in translation, as it also means "book to leaf through." Botanists paste dried leaves or plant specimens into albums called *Blätterbücher*. The world of paper and books is wholly dependent on plants as well. We still find this in etymological connections such as the leaves or pages of a book (*folio* in Latin), and the very word "book" itself, which comes from the German *Buche* ("beech tree").⁶ As a child Kovacovsky was fascinated by botanical books. A favourite was *Was blüht denn da?* ("What's blooming there?"), a classic reference book organised by colour (visible on the edge of the pages when the book is closed) and the shape of the petals.

And so, the photogram and the book seem perfectly suited to "express the soul of the leaf," just as the book itself has often been compared to the realm of nature. The book of nature is there to read, to leaf through, to admire, to reflect, to understand, and so on. The French poet Francis Ponge, whose poetry attempts to let things speak for themselves (mediated by the hypersensitive poet), wrote that flora and fauna waited for passersby to *read* them and help to fulfill their expressions. For the Romantics, every artform was an expression of nature. I've often wondered if photography is not the artform in which nature finds itself most perfectly reflected. But then there's the

invisible photo-industrial complex of camera producers and software developers behind it that remains out of immediate sight.

The leaves gathered in this book may remain silent on many things, yet Kovacovsky has made them *speak*, like the passerby who listens carefully to the leaves and helps them achieve their fullest expression. Never before had I pondered the myriad functions and meanings of the leaf, but after having encountered these marvelous compositions, I will no longer look at leaves with anything but the utmost admiration for their crucial function in the cycles of life. Leaves let life breathe. The shape of that breathing has been made visible here.

Taco Hidde Bakker is a writer, translator, teacher and curator in the field of the arts, specialising in photography. He studied at two art schools and obtained an MA in Photographic Studies at Leiden University. He has contributed writing to numerous artist's books, catalogs and magazines, among Camera Austria International, Foam Magazine, British Journal of Photography, and TRIGGER. Bakker is the author of *The Photograph That Took the Place of a Mountain* (Fw:Books, Amsterdam 2018), a collection of essays and other writings on photographers and artists. He teaches Theory at the Utrecht University of the Arts (HKU).

