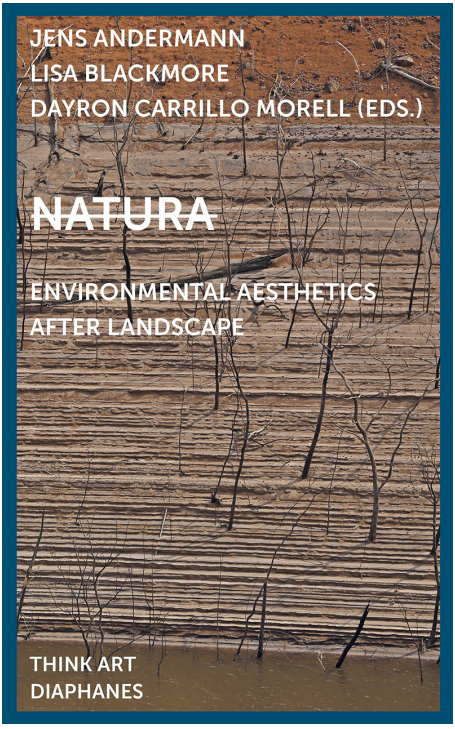
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NATURA
ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS
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DIAPHANES

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Towards a *Phanerology* of Images: Karl Blossfeldt and the Skin of the World

1. Morphology and archetype

The first collection of photographs assembled by Karl Blossfeldt in 1928 is called *Urformen der Kunst* (Originary forms of art). The work's title changed over the next two decades, first to *Wundergarten der Natur* (Nature's magic garden) in 1932 and later, in 1942, to *Wunder in der Natur* (Wonders in nature), before it reverted back to the original title in 1948.[1] Even with this back-and-forth, however, a shared semantic field remained in place, which gathered the originary forms (*Urformen*) in a kind of "magic garden" (*Wundergarten*), which emphasized the "magical" condition of nature, as the forms unveiled by the artist suggested a fusion between the natural world and photographic technology. Apparently, photographic technology was a secondary concern for Blossfeldt, enlisted only as means to render details of vegetable life in extreme close-up and, thus, to reveal a border between technology and magic of the kind that Walter Benjamin was elaborating on at just the same time, since the making-visible of vegetable life in its details here no longer entailed a magical orientation towards the material world. For Blossfeldt, photography was a *medium* for documenting the vegetable life of the Mediterranean, especially in Rome where he

1 Hanako Murata, "Material Forms in Nature: The Photographs of Karl Blossfeldt," in *Object: Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014). http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Murata.pdf, accessed September 2017.

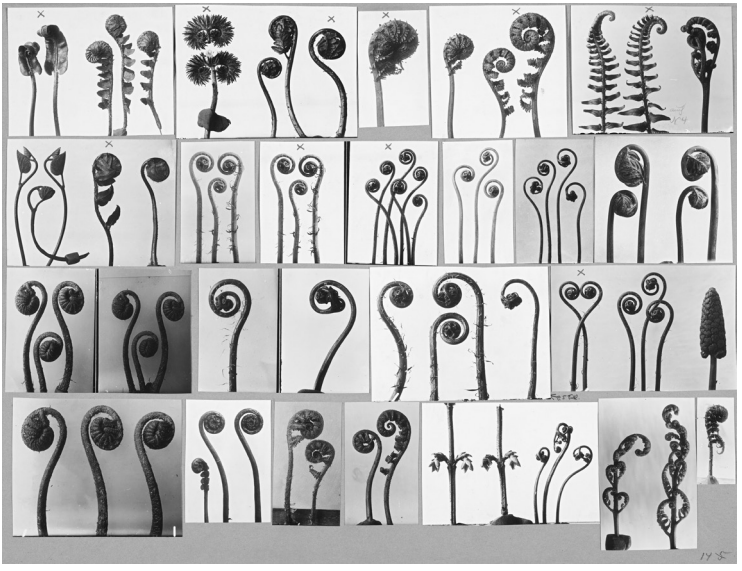


Figure 1. Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 1—Rough horsetails I. Karl Blossfeldt Archiv/ Stiftung Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Pinakothek der Moderne, München.

was assisting his mentor, the artist and professor of ornament and design Moritz Meurer. In Blossfeldt's images, constructive and ornamental detail was shown to be already present in the life of plants—before it became the result of human invention (Fig. 1).

Thanks to this quest for the origin of forms in plants, which triggered a technical innovation, the relationship between the ideas of "biotope" and "originary form" also took on a more intense character (Fig. 2). The first of these terms refers to the biological revelation of homogeneous conditions of life and, by extension, to the principles of classification that allow us to group plants together and to define environments. Even though Blossfeldt was calling for a contemplation of life in its minute details, practically abandoning the idea of nature, which remained present only as a distant reference, his photographs

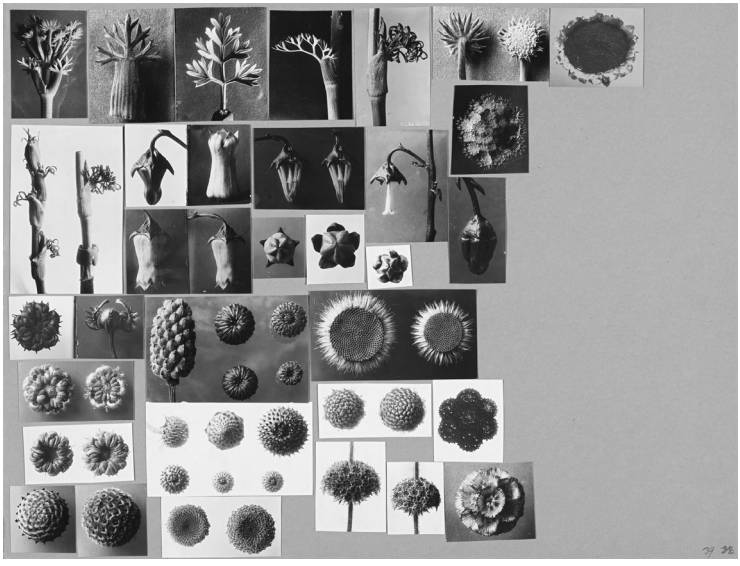


Figure 2. Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 9—Umbelliffers and love-in-a-mist. Karl Blossfeldt Archiv/ Stiftung Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Pinakothek der Moderne, München.

were also situated at a limit, looking back towards Goethe and, more precisely, to *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, where the contemplation of nature had sustained an entire semantics. Yet Blossfeld's images subsequently made a significant impact on the avant-gardes as well, among them the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in Germany, and the work of László Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus group, where references to the natural world informed the curves and abstract solutions of design. Blossfeldt's pictures were also the subject of Walter Benjamin's short article "Du nouveau sur les fleurs" (1928), subsequently developed into his "Short History of Photography" (1931), and they also contributed to the telluric force of the journal *Documents*, edited by, among others, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Carl Einstein between 1929 and 1930. In Latin America, in autumn of 1931, the journal *Sur* in Buenos

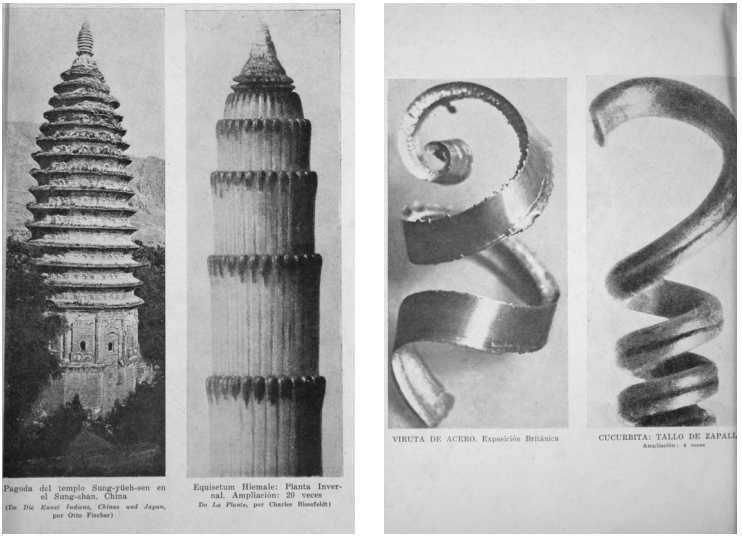


Figure 3 & 4. *Sur* 1 (Autumn 1931). Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina, Buenos Aires.

Aires published some of Blossfeldt's photographs, placing them in the company of other images, such as a Chinese temple photographed by Otto Fischer and comparing them with industrial images, such as a close-up shot of a steel shaft and another of the gearbox of a machine (Figs. 3 and 4). The German photographer's pictures served here to establish analogies by way of scaling, as if in the detail blown up to a ratio of one-to-twenty a previous reproduction of the forms of the world could be made visible. His images, then, played a part in the incorporation of the blown-up photographic detail into the image-world of the first half of the twentieth century.

Karl Blossfeldt's images reveal the existence of a "skin of the world" since, through the blowing-up of details and through the subsequent production of analogies, the artist shows how the world reproduces itself infinitely through the infinitesimal. The tactile quality of the skin, its capacity for touching and being touched, is thus bestowed on a gaze beholding something that

the haptic sense had already known before. Blossfeldt contributes to a "skin of the world" by devising new kinds of *social forms* through his photographs, thanks to this "touching with the eyes." He alters the subject's presence in the world by forging new, composite and morphological types of images of natural life and of its formerly secret or invisible mechanisms. The concept of "skin of the world" offers a way of thinking the existence of the technical nature of images, as well as their relation with the natural world that is caught between the leap and the ellipsis, that is, between technology and magic, a tension that makes itself felt in Karl Blossfeldt's images. A productive way of thinking about this body of work would be to take it outside of the history of photography and towards a *phanerology* of images. The latter term derives from the writings of the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann, in particular his book *Die Tiergestalt* (*Animal Form*), published in 1948.[2] In that work, the elements of appearance and presentation materially invoke those parts of the body that are in a process of constant renewal: the epidermis, as well as hair, finger- and toenails, and teeth. In the case of the vegetable world, while the surface of plants is certainly different from human skin, the wider notion of "shell" nevertheless allows us to identify a common element from which to develop such a *phanerological* perspective. *Shell—écorce* in French, or *casca* in Portuguese—is a term whose Latin etymology, preserved in the medieval noun *scortea*, resonates with the idea of "layers of skin," understood here as "the surface of an appearance gifted with life, reacting to pain and to the promise of death,"

2 In France, Portmann is a relatively well-known author in the areas of philosophy, literary theory, and art history, thanks to the work of critics such as Dominique Lestel (*Les origines animales de la culture*), Marielle Macé (*Styles animaux*), Emanuele Coccia (*La vie sensible*), and Bernard Prévost (*Les apparences inadressés. Usages de Portmann*), as well as the pioneering contributions of Jacques Dewitte who also translated Portmann into French.

as Georges Didi-Huberman puts it in *Écorces*, adding: "Trees, too, have a skin."[3]

From a morphological point of view, Goethe's work helps us understand a form of temporality that precedes that of Blossfeldt's images. This temporality is situated between the biotope and the originary form, that is, between the conditions of life in a certain place, its uniform physical and chemical characteristics, and the development of each of its elements. This refers back to the method Goethe devised for observing plants in order to identify an underlying morphology. The dynamic thus installed focuses more on the act of *distinguishing* than it does on the search for *resemblances*. Whereas Goethe was looking for a secret affinity between the "different external parts of plants," in what was becoming known as "the metamorphosis of plants," Blossfeldt was freezing the successive stages of this same metamorphosis in order to apprehend the detail.[4] In this act of freezing, resemblance resurges on account of the repetition of motives. Herein lies the most immediate difference between Goethe's and Blossfeldt's morphological perspectives.

In her introduction to *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Maria Filomena Molder points to a methodology devised by Goethe, which apprehends objects in a moment that comes after the act of contemplation. In Goethe's words, "The act of distinguishing is more difficult and laborious than the act of finding resemblances and, when one distinguishes correctly, the objects will compare themselves spontaneously with one another," as if the gaze capable of distinguishing between objects also brought to life an intelligence within things themselves.[5] We are faced here

3 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Écorces* (Paris: Minuit, 2011), p. 70. My translation.

4 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *A metamorfose das plantas*, trans. Maria Filomena Molder (Lisboa: Casa da Moeda, 1993). Originally published as *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (Berlin: Holzinger, 2016 [1790]), p. 35.

5 Maria Filomena Molder, introduction to Goethe, *A metamorfose das plantas*, p. 21. My translation.

with one of the most successful distinctions for the analysis of images throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the result of an objective way that allows itself to be permeated by a *heuristics of the natural world*. On the other hand, if we were to shift our attention to the *optical* battles waged by the avant-gardes, we could also find in these a different kind of skin-image, according to which the continuous changing and proliferation of images could be understood simply as a changing of the "skin of the world." Returning to Goethe's methodological proposal with this idea in mind, we could envisage a morphological procedure in which everything that has form is also subject to constant modification. This would be the living intuition of nature, and, in order to take hold of it, we would also have to maintain ourselves in constant "mobility" as well as "plasticity." Yet, in contrast to Goethe's observational method, Blossfeldt's images are a membrane that, in the medium of photography, conjoins the explicit temporality of the biotope with that of the originary form. Blossfeldt modifies the Goethean proposition because photography becomes a biotope that is foreign to the natural world, a naturalized technology, as Rolf Sachse puts it, since, in Blossfeldt, "plants are rarely seen from above and even less from the side, instead being almost always placed on a grey, white or black paperboard. [...] Nothing distracts our attention from the object."[6]

Blossfeldt's images, then, are not merely a supplement to *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, first and foremost because Goethe, when publishing his text, had discarded images of any kind: "I have ventured to develop the present essay without reference to illustrations, although they might seem necessary in some respects. I will reserve their publication until later; this is

6 Rolf Sachse, *Karl Blossfeldt* (Köln-Berlin: Taschen, 1996), p. 5.

made easier by the fact that enough material remains for further elucidation and expansion of this short preliminary treatise."[7]

The image is the irreductible element that distinguishes Goethe's morphology from Blossfeldt's since, as Ulrike Meyer-Stump puts it, the material morphology of the latter's tables and collages seeks out the archetypes of aesthetic expression, not vegetable life:

> Blossfeldt's working collages are not a photographic herbarium, although they have been described as such. Blossfeldt's interest in botany was marginal. While he took the trouble to identify some of his plants, he dissected others beyond recognition. The driving force behind his research into plants was not, as in the case of Goethe's morphological studies, the quest for an "archetypal plant" (*Urpflanze*), but for "archetypal art."[8]

Even while he justified quite forcefully the absence of images—Goethe's morphology occurs entirely on the level of language—in the introduction to *The Metamorphosis of Plants* we also stumble upon the "secret affinity" Goethe refers to when discussing the different external parts of the plant (the leaves, the calyx, the corolla, the stamen). It is this "affinity," in fact, which maintains the connection between Goethe and Blossfeldt in relation to plant morphology.

With respect to matter and materiality, however, this heuristics of nature is now being taken in the direction of technology, with its ramifications extending into language. More precisely, the images themselves now become a part of the skin of the world since, even though they possess a particular form, this form can never remain stable. Rather, plants constantly

7 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, trans. Gordon L. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), p. 10.
8 Ulrike Meyer-Stump, introduction to *Karl Blossfeldt: Working Collages*, eds. Ann Wilde and Jürgen Wilde (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 15.

undergo a process of transformation due to the analogies established with regard to other objects in the world. Through this game of resemblances, they also contribute to a constant refocusing of the gaze. These, then, are the foundations that sustain the flow of images with regard to the skin of the world, that is, to an assemblage that generates an expanded temporality by virtue of the details to which it provides access. In this way, Blossfeldt's images played a decisive part in the world's skin change during the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, we could ask, does such a hypothesis in relation to the skin of the world not end up being a mimetic inversion of what, with Goethe, we have learned to think of as the relation between *form* and *formation*? Or has the very idea of nature now suffered an alteration at the hands of technology, as the zoologist Adolf Portmann would suggest when trying to corroborate Goethe's intuitions by way of science? In his *Neue Wege der Biologie* (*New Paths in Biology*), Portmann explains that "technical comprehension is an essential factor in the formation of our current image of the living."[9] Walter Benjamin, striking a balance between Goethe and Portmann, would sustain that nature addresses technology in a different way than it does the human gaze, since "it is a different nature that speaks to the camera from the one that catches the eye."[10]

Blossfeldt's images, moreover, have a rhythm of comings and goings that are effectively material. They connect with an era—and bind together an era—insomuch as they acquire a particular form, even if they continue their transformation almost immediately. The samples taken from vegetable life might initially follow a biological model, only to then invent their own organs as each image addresses its beholder. Prior

9 Adolf Portmann, *Neue Wege der Biologie* (München: R. Piper, 1960), p. 71. My translation.

10 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13, no. 1 (1 March 1972): p. 5–26, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/13.1.5

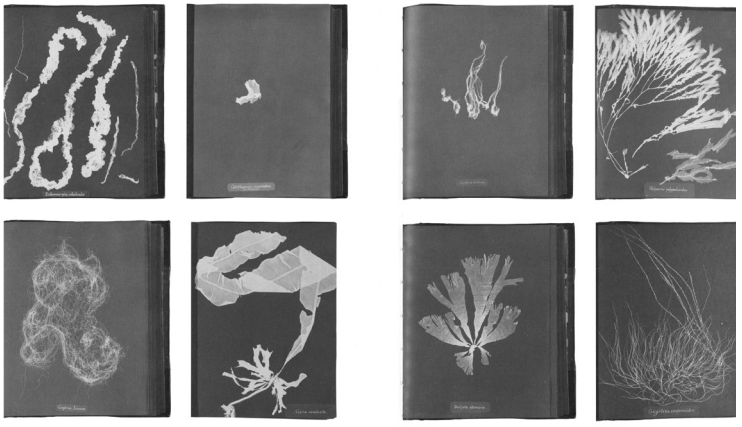


Figure 5. Anna Atkins, *Photographs of British Algae*, 1843–1853. Mattie Boom, Hans Rooseboom, Saskia Asser, Steven F. Joseph, and Martin Jürgens, *New Realities: Photography in the 19th Century* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2017), p. 51.

to Blossfeldt, we can already appreciate photography's mode of apprehending a specific, individualized nature in the pioneering work of Anna Atkins who, between 1843 and 1855, composed a series of impressions of aquatic plants (*British Algae*) through the process of creating cyanotype prints, resulting from direct contact between the plants and the paper (Fig. 5).[11] Here, the fusion between technology and paper literally produced a skin. Apart from Atkins, the work of photographers such as Martin Gerlach or Charles Aubry, as well as the amplified microscopic prints of paper fiber itself around 1900, attest to the fact that Karl Blossfeldt's invention came about in stages—not evolutive but morphological ones—of transforming technological nature through photography (Fig. 6).

11 I wish to thank Jill H. Casid for pointing me to Atkins' work.

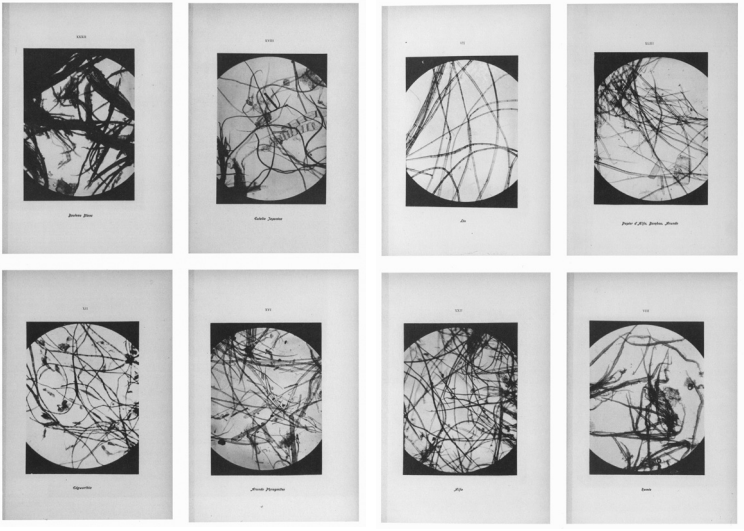


Figure 6. Anonymous (France), Microscopic prints made from paper fiber, 1900. Reproduced in: Mattie Boom, Hans Rooseboom, Saskia Asser, Steven F. Joseph, and Martin Jürgens, *New Realities: Photography in the 19th Century* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2017), p. 243.*

* In his contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *New Realities: Photography in the 19th Century* at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (June 17 to September 17, 2017), Hans Rooseboom highlights the importance of botany for the development of photography, pointing out that "while botany was the first scientific field where photography was applied (the photograms of William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography, and those of Anna Atkins, the first female photographer), it was one of those areas where the need for schematic representation was so great that the wealth of detail in a photograph was more of a drawback than an advantage." Hans Rooseboom, "Work in Progress," in *New Realities: Photography in the 19th Century* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2017), p. 30.

Blossfeldt, in sum, was continuing in this line of morphological transformations by way of the associative power of his images which offered yet another starting point for articulating the notions of image and of rhythm. In *Primitive Art* (1927), Franz Boas points to the need to consider the phenomenon of rhythm, since "the ability of primitive artists to

appreciate rhythm seems to be much greater than our own."[12] The sequence of arguments briefly sketched out here—Goethe, Portmann, Benjamin, Boas—also helps us locate and look at Blossfeldt's oeuvre in relation to the technology of photography itself, which changes our mode of observing the natural world and which those looking for originary forms in nature might have turned to—had it been available—in order to record nature's own rhythm. Indeed, perhaps this very rhythm was also a criterion, for Blossfeldt, for classifying and arranging plants into visual tables.

These images also contrast with Ernst Haeckel's illustrations, published in 1899 in his *Kunstformen der Natur* (*Art Forms in Nature*). Haeckel had been an important influence on art nouveau style, including Émile Gallé's glass panels, the architecture of René Binet at the 1900 Paris World's Fair, and even the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí whose organic forms were an amplified expression of Haeckel's aquatic organisms, as Andrea Wulf suggests in *The Invention of Nature*.[13] It is important to underscore, however, that the dynamic of plant life becomes itself the starting point for the development of vegetable iconographies in photography. Whereas, with Blossfeldt, we are faced with stable images and with tables in which the photographs of individual plants are organized by way of their forms, and constituted as forms, it is important to understand that their process of transformation also continued throughout the twentieth century. In the first half of the century, this transformation occurred at the hands of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, movement. This movement's works unveil the *magical* element of objects—forged by means of technology—providing a response to, and a way out of, the emotional reactions of German expressionism. It is because his work contains

12 Franz Boas, *Primitive Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 350.
13 Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), p. 312–313.

this same aspect too, that Karl Blossfeldt can be considered a precursor of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

2. Blossfeldt: The Skin of the World and the Humus of Modernity

In order to maintain the unity of object and thought, Goethe had asserted his capacity for an *objectively* active thinking (Fig. 7). Intuitions are not only a mode of penetrating objects, they are also perforated by them, and it is for this reason that Goethe writes that "every object, when it is well contemplated, originates a new organ within ourselves."[14] Contemplation, which occurs in a different way in Blossfeldt, remained an important issue until it was replaced by an imaginary of vegetable details as if seen through a microscope: the real as altered through amplification continuously contributes to the formation of new images, paradoxically also unleashing at once a continuous striving for objectivity and an affirmation of photography as a form of art and articulating, in photographic language itself, a tension between transparency and opacity (Fig. 8).

Karl Blossfeldt's images responded to these expectations, rigorously fulfilling the photographic image's documentary duties whilst also inscribing it with an undoubtedly artistic value, as Benjamin immediately understood, since his images also go beyond purely physiognomic or scientific interests. What I would like to highlight, however, is the underlying motivation for inventing a pedagogical tool for design and sculpture, an idea that originated in Blossfeldt's industrial design classes; after all, he was looking in nature for models of construction to be put to use at the School of Decorative Arts in Berlin. His interest in vegetable ornaments brought him to photography at a time when the latter still needed a discourse that could legitimize it

14 Goethe, *A metamorfose das plantas*, p. 67. My translation.

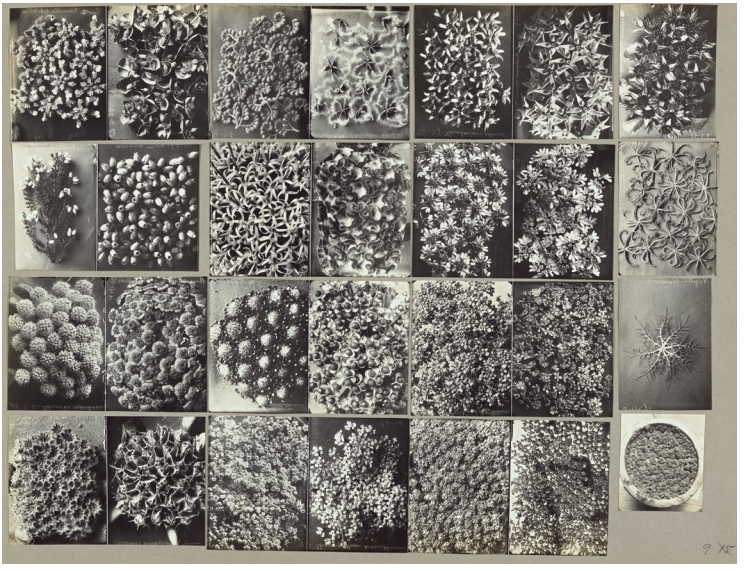


Figure 7. Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 14—Ferns I. Karl Blossfeldt Archiv/Stiftung Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Pinakothek der Moderne, München.

as a manifestation of art, beyond the botanical albums which, with rapid improvements in print quality, were responding to people's curiosity. Blossfeldt, the researcher of forms, almost immediately saw his images lose their intended status as teaching materials and ascend to that of photographic art.

There is a temporal dimension in which Blossfeldt's images approximate, by way of their rhythm, those of photographers such as August Sander or Albert Benger-Pantzsch. In *Le style documentaire*, Olivier Lugon discusses the contemporary reception of Blossfeldt's work, highlighting the notion of a *comparative anatomy* of the object-world, where only methodical work could bestow knowledge and pedagogical value on the images.[15] Blossfeldt appears here as a plant anatomist who

15 Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire: D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920–1945* (Paris: Macula, 2016) p. 296–297.

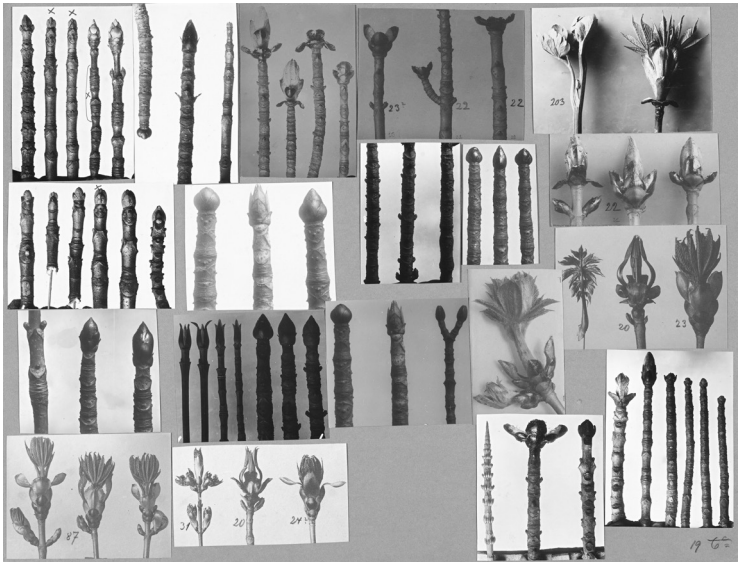


Figure 8. Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 19—Dogwood and horse chestnut. Karl Blossfeldt Archiv/ Stiftung Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Pinakothek der Moderne, München.

composes tables in which details encounter each other through their ramifications. Together, Blossfeldt's tables testify to a rich work of *documentation* carried out on the basis of the vegetation of the Mediterranean. Minute detail, thanks to the blow-up technology of photography, acquires a scale accessible to human vision. The entire culture of ornamentality, we could conclude, was but a paraphrase of something that, until then, we had ignored because its scale placed it out of reach for the naked eye. The artist constructs a botany of images captured by photography, establishing in them a certain kind of *bios*—in conceiving twisted, asymmetrical, or disproportionate forms—and isolating this *bios* from its original biotope. This principle of abstraction from place adds to the excessive realism of the images, their clean objectivity, calling once again on the magic of technology at a moment when technology and magic were

parting ways, in order to apprehend nature in and through its details.

A morphological element is present in the details of each of the images. Perhaps it is precisely in this respect that Blossfeldt's images renewed the way in which such details could be observed, since there is also a subterranean history of these visible surfaces. The modernism of these images also composed, structurally speaking, a ground, a *humus*, which is the harbinger of the skin of the world. If the hegemonic discourse of modernism used to invoke the hypothesis of a primitive force, this was because it needed to be underwritten by a consciousness of rhythm within the technology that absorbed the *nature* of natural forms. Each and every technological advance of the twentieth century thus also turned once again towards the sign of the origin, the primitive, the elemental.[16]

In Blossfeldt, this "primitive force" takes on "a highly artistic form."[17] To awaken this force through an amplification of the vegetable world opens up a historical distance between technology and magic, as Walter Benjamin immediately under-

16 The notion of the "elemental," paradoxically, was an important one for the construction of European thinking in the twentieth century, as a number of titles demonstrate in exemplary fashion: *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912), by Émile Durkheim, or *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 1949), by Claude Lévi-Strauss. American anthropology also provides a structural-morphological vantage point from which to read Blossfeldt's images, in particular through the notion of "pattern" coined by Franz Boas. The argument of the "survival" of particular motives that articulate a "tradition," which integrates the literature produced under the influence of Aby Warburg, also contains anthropological aspects that are present in the work of Edward B. Taylor or in Franz Boas, where we can read sentences such as the following: "It has often been observed that cultural traits are exceedingly tenacious and that features of hoary antiquity survive until the present day. This has led to the impression that primitive culture is almost stable and has remained what it is for many centuries. This does not correspond to the facts. Wherever we have detailed information we see forms of objects and customs in constant flux, sometimes stable for a period, then undergoing rapid changes." Boas, *Primitive Art*, p. 6–7.

17 Sachse, *Karl Blossfeldt*, p. 48.

stood in his "Short History of Photography" or, even earlier, in "Du nouveau sur les fleurs," where, as early as 1928, he had already mentioned flowers' stylistic, even totemic forms, to conclude with a Latin formula recovered by Leibniz: *natura non facit saltus*.[18] Whether or not nature really does not make leaps, does not *the nature of the image*, arising from the tension between the continuity and discontinuity set in motion by technology, represent a leap in relation to the natural world?

Science and technology oscillate between leap and ellipsis in relation to nature, according to Muriel Pic, who has suggested that "modernity doubly stages the artistic and scientific dimension of observing nature."[19] Drawing on Aby Warburg, whose own *Mnemosyne Atlas* was not least a pedagogical instrument for reading images within a wider field, Pic concludes that "the legibility of the world is a natural history of images, where meaning circulates from human to astral bodies and forges a dialectical relation between intimacy and immensity, between the visceral and the celestial."[20] In this giant ellipsis that leaps from the viscera to the stars, each and every fold produced in its course is also the object of a discontinuous dialogue between artistic forms and their displacements. Displacement itself becomes an attempt, an experiment, indeed a leap that is determined by photographic technology. The latter played a decisive part in the production of pedagogical innovations, as was the case with Blossfeldt and Warburg. The drive to call on the primitive and to establish there, in its most intense and insidious moment, in the paraphrase of an earlier time—primitivism—a

18 This definition is not far removed from American photographer Walker Evans's attempts to define a documentary style. See, on the latter, Lugon, *Le style documentaire*, p. 166.

19 Muriel Pic, "Leçons d'anatomie: Pour une histoire naturelle des images chez Walter Benjamin," in *L'histoire de l'art depuis Walter Benjamin*, ed. Giovanni Careri and Georges Didi-Huberman (Paris: Éditions Mimesis, 2015), p. 153–183, here p. 166. My translation.

20 Pic, "Leçons d'anatomie," p. 183.

proximity between animal, vegetable, and "uncivilized" human life, turned the entire twentieth century into a battleground between forms and experiences that together, through the very production of images, also compose a "skin of the world."

A rich, continuously changing weft of details emerges once we observe the remains of abandoned matter in the moment of their very formation or renewal. Technology, in this sense, accelerates the production of an unconscious, through a kind of hypertrophy that interrupts logical discourse, as in the photosensitive intelligence that characterizes photography. Blossfeldt simultaneously drew a line to Goethe, from whom he took his morphological approach, and to the avant-gardes, which would organize the skin of the world along different, historical vectors. In this field of forces, we could orientate ourselves by attending to their remains, or better, to their *phanerae*, their appearance-being, which sets out in minute detail the fractures in the land, the ribbing of plants, and the fugitive character of animal life. These, then, are the *humus* of modernity, resulting from a continuous skin-change, which is to say, from telluric images. Carl Einstein, in the first issue of the journal *Documents*, in 1929, where he began producing his *methodical aphorisms*, coined the phrase that "the history of art is the struggle of all optical experiences, invented spaces, and figurations."[21] We could add that in this struggle, the images, in their transformations in becoming a skin, reveal the materiality of these changes as they pass through the history of ideas, through technological change, and through the constant alterations of our own perception: their skin-ness does not remain merely at the stage of metaphor. Even though Blossfeldt fashioned his images in the confines of his studio, their nature resonates throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with their flowers set against dark backgrounds, their stamens set against

21 Carl Einstein, "Aphorismes méthodiques," in *Documents, vol. 1*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 32

rough surfaces, such as paper sheets or neutral backgrounds, and with their precise focal range revealing the minute detail of tiny hairs and thorns, and emphasizing folds, tips, repetitions of elements and their ramifications, all of which together gives rise to the perception of a vegetable rhythm which throbs outside human life.

Blossfeldt's tables put on display not just the details of vegetable life but also its movement, through the way in which he arranged the images. The images are not merely blown up but also enter into a temporal relation with the beholder—of acceleration or deceleration—that modifies our perception, the latter being the alliance we construct in relation to images. Between 1929 and 1930, this temporality that resulted from controlling the rhythm of images, found a strong resonance with the work of a director who also was a film theoretician, Jean Epstein, the creator of the concept of *photogénie*. In his *Photogénie de l'impondérable* (1935), Epstein writes:

> Slow motion and accelerated motion reveal a world in which there are no more borders between the reigns of nature. The crystals grow, rise before one another, come together with the sweetness of sympathy. Symmetries are their custom and traditions. What is so different between them and the flowers or the cells of our most noble tissues? And the plant that prepares its stem, turns its leaves toward the light, spreads and closes its corolla, that rests its stamen on the pistil, does it not, in accelerated motion, have exactly the same quality of life as the horse and its rider which, in slow motion, leap across the obstacle, the one inclining himself over the other? And the swarming of decay is in fact a rebirth.[22]

With Epstein, morphology, as inherited from Goethe, undergoes a transformation and comes to illuminate in the field of images the semantic layer of the modern *humus*, which

22 Jean Epstein quoted in Pic, "Leçons d'anatomie," p. 167.

would also become visible with George Bataille's "language of flowers" and with Walter Benjamin's concept of the *optical unconscious*, two of modernity's most influential approaches to the image, for which Blossfeldt was a key point of reference.

3. From the Novelty of Flowers to the Language of Flowers: Blossfeldt between Benjamin and Bataille

For his article "Le langage des fleurs" ("The Language of Flowers"), published in 1929 in the journal *Documents*, Georges Bataille relied on Blossfeldt's photographs—unpublished in France until then—as he explains at the end of the text (Fig. 9). Blossfeldt's plant details allowed Bataille to close in on vegetable nature's obscure *decision*, since, after all, "everything that is revealed by the configuration and color of the corolla, by the filth of pollen or the freshness of the pistil, undoubtedly cannot be adequately expressed within language."[23] With Bataille, the vegetable world becomes a problem of poetic language, an association that emerges at the point where he declares his disdain for poetry or, perhaps, rather for the flowering of language, for the ornament. Bataille argues against an ornamental use of language, which for him is the "emblem of sadness" or "the lotus of indifference." In this critique, which is expressed in an at once rigid and parodic tone, what is at stake is the relation between form and formation within plant life: "The role given to symbols in psychoanalytic interpretations would corroborate, moreover, an explanation of this kind."[24]

23 Georges Bataille, "Le langage des fleurs," in *Documents, vol. 1*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 160–168, here p. 160. My translation.
24 Bataille, "Le langage des fleurs," p. 160.

In his detailed analysis of the language of flowers, Bataille unveils their architecture, caught between an ideal beauty and the merely episodic character of their life. Descending towards the roots of the plant, Bataille claims that the ephemeral character of the rose, which declines as its flower defoliates, contrasts with the roots in their amorous pursuit of putrefaction underground, hidden from view. In this struggle to disentangle flowers from the symbolism of love, Bataille inverts the polarity and associates them with death: "Love has the smell of death."[25] Moreover, his emphasis on the lower realm, on the life of the roots, places flowers in relation to evil (Fig. 10).

As he elaborates this lowly and material "language of flowers," Bataille also abandons a fundamental contradiction, which he eliminates through an oxymoron. He attacks a certain kind of symbolic reading of the flower, a search for its *categorical imperative*, identified with the part of the plant in which it realizes itself, replacing it with a different value-system, one that grants preference to the lowly—even though he himself had previously judged nature to be condemned to abstraction, against any attempt to ascribe a philosophical purpose to it. Blossfeldt's photographs, reproduced throughout the text, testify to the monstrous aspect of the Azorean campanula, just as they reveal the diabolical ornaments of a turnip's ramifications, the details of a giant horsetail, a wild rice plant, or a fern. Bataille dramatizes these elements of different plants, rechanneling the reader's abstracting gaze towards the details of the images.[26]

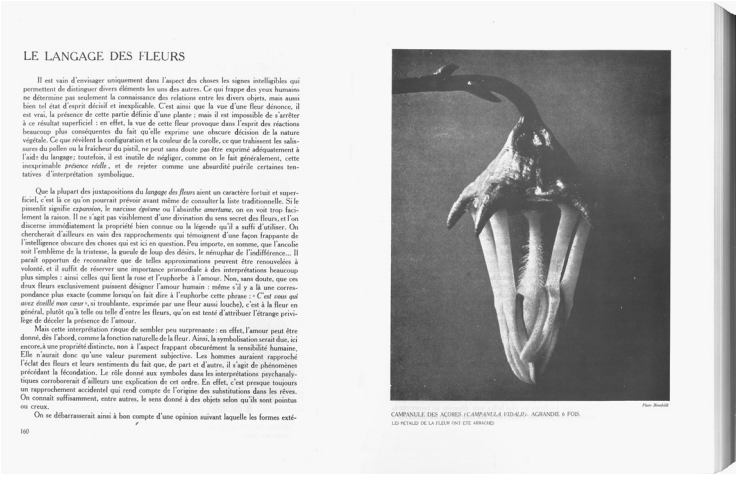
25 Bataille, "Le langage des fleurs," p. 163.

26 Portmann, too, allows us to imagine these pictures as part of a continuous skin-change, comparing Bataille's take on them to what the zoologist would point out in his *Neue Wege der Biologie*: "In order to confront forms of life that we find 'disgusting' [unansehnlich], we have to make an effort to imagine that, neither in the technical sense nor in accordance with our laws of vision, we can easily get hold of the powers of dissimulation." Portmann, "Die Naturgestalt," p. 82. In Bataille, the topic of a "lowly materiality" is framed in a less metaphysical and ontological way than in Portmann's notion of the *unansehnlich* (literally, what is impossible to be looked at).

Figure 9. Karl Blossfeldt, Plate 39—Pheasant's eye and scabious. Karl Blossfeldt Archiv/Stiftung Ann und Jürgen Wilde, Pinakothek der Moderne, München.

André Gunthert, offering an archeology of the "Short History of Photography"—the essay Benjamin published in three installments in the journal *Die literarische Welt* between September and October 1931—refers us to three works published in the form of photographic albums: those of Albert Renger-Patzsch and Karl Blossfeldt, both from 1928, and that of August Sander, from 1929. With regard to Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst*, Gunthert cross-references the various readings by Bataille, who elaborates a *semiotics* of the language of flowers, and by Benjamin, who, "based on the mechanisms of caricature, offers a brilliant reflection on the problem of amplification."[27] It is in combining both readings, I would suggest that a skin of

27 André Gunthert, "Archéologie de la *Petite Histoire de la photographie*," in Careri and Didi-Huberman, *L'histoire de l'art*, p. 139–151, here p. 144.



LE LANGAGE DES FLEURS

Il est vain d'envisager uniquement dans l'aspect des choses les signes intelligibles qui permettent de distinguer divers éléments les uns des autres. Ce qui frappe des yeux humains ne détermine pas seulement la connaissance des relations entre les divers objets, mais aussi bien tel état d'esprit décisif et inexplicable. C'est ainsi que la vue d'une fleur dénonce, il est vrai, la présence de cette partie définie d'une plante ; mais il est impossible de s'arrêter à ce résultat superficiel : en effet, la vue de cette fleur provoque dans l'esprit des réactions beaucoup plus conséquentes du fait qu'elle exprime une obscure décision de la nature végétale. Ce que révèlent la configuration et la couleur de la corolle, ce que traduisent les salissures du pollen ou la fraîcheur du pistil, ne peut sans doute pas être exprimé adéquatement à l'aide du langage ; toutefois, il est inutile de négliger, comme on le fait généralement, cette inexprimable *présence réelle*, et de rejeter comme une absurdité puérile certaines tentatives d'interprétation symbolique.

Que la plupart des juxtapositions du *langage des fleurs* aient un caractère fortuit et superficiel, c'est là ce qu'on pourrait prévoir avant même de consulter la liste traditionnelle. Si le pissenlit signifie *expansion*, le narcisse *égoïsme* ou l'absinthe *amertume*, on en voit trop facilement la raison. Il ne s'agit pas visiblement d'une divination du sens secret des fleurs, et l'on discerne immédiatement la propriété bien connue ou la légende qu'il a suffi d'utiliser. On chercherait d'ailleurs en vain des rapprochements qui témoignent d'une façon frappante de l'intelligence obscure des choses qui est ici en question. Peu importe, en somme, que l'ancolie soit l'emblème de la tristesse, la gueule de loup des désirs, le réséda de l'indifférence... Il paraît opportun de reconnaître que de telles approximations peuvent être renouvelées à volonté, et il suffit de réserver une importance primordiale à des interprétations beaucoup plus simples : ainsi celles qui lient la rose et l'euphorbe à l'amour. Non, sans doute, que ces deux fleurs exclusivement puissent désigner l'amour humain : même s'il y a là une correspondance plus exacte (comme lorsqu'on fait dire à l'euphorbe cette phrase : *C'est vous qui avez éveillé mon cœur*), si troublante, exprimée par une fleur aussi louche), c'est à la fleur en général, plutôt qu'à telle ou telle d'entre les fleurs, qu'on est tenté d'attribuer l'étrange privilège de décider la présence de l'amour.

Mais cette interprétation risque de sembler peu surprenante : en effet, l'amour peut être donné, dès l'abord, comme la fonction naturelle de la fleur. Ainsi, la symbolisation serait due, ici encore, à une propriété distincte, non à l'aspect frappant obscurément la sensibilité humaine. Elle n'aurait donc qu'une valeur purement subjective. Les hommes auraient rapproché l'éclat des fleurs et leurs sentiments du fait que, de part et d'autre, il s'agit de phénomènes précédant la fécondation. Le rôle donné aux symboles dans les interprétations psychanalytiques corroborerait d'ailleurs une explication de cet ordre. En effet, c'est presque toujours un rapprochement accidentel qui rend compte de l'origine des substitutions dans les rêves. On connaît suffisamment, entre autres, le sens donné à des objets selon qu'ils sont pointus ou creux.

On se débarrasserait ainsi à bon compte d'une opinion suivant laquelle les formes exté-

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CAMPANULE DES ALPES (*CAMPANULA VIDALII*). AGRANDIE 6 FOIS.
LES PÉTALES DE LA FLEUR ONT ÉTÉ ARRACHÉS

Figure 10. Photographs by Karl Blossfeldt in *Documents, vol. 1*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992), p. 160–161.

the world can be developed—that is, by cross-referencing semiotics and technological change, the flowering of details brings about, simultaneously, a change in the symbolic value of the images and in their social representation. From the "novelty of flowers" to the "language of flowers," from "optical unconscious" to "lowly materialism," from *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Goethe) to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, by way of Epstein's notion of *photogénie*, Karl Blossfeldt's photographic oeuvre invites us time and again to think of images as a skin of the world. The leaps of nature occur in the silence of images, in the details that never cease to jump out towards the beholder, in the displacements to which different knowledges are subjected *within* the images (in their details): *in* the images, but also *with* the images (through the composition of the tables) and *between* images (in the readings that take them as their point of departure).