

Signals From Roots To Leaves: A Post-Botanical Assembly

Anna Zemánková

Electrical Flower

first half of 1960s, tempera, pastel and India ink on paper,
59.5 x 84 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková



THE LANGUAGE OF PLANTS

CEIBA, INA RÖDER
SISSOKO AND
SUZA HUSSE IN
CONVERSATION
IMAGES BY ANNA
ZEMÁNKOVÁ



Ceiba (ceiba speciosa) in the Palmhouse of the
Botanical Garden Olomouc, November 2020

Photo: Monika Abrhánová

Visual materials from video art and films by
Anna Zett, Marwa Arsanios, Naomi Rincón
Gallardo, Phuong Linh Nguyen

Maguey (Agave), Qirnefîl (Carnation),
Riesenschilf (Giant reed) and Đa búp đỏ
(Rubber tree) in texts by Suza Husse and
images by Monika Abrhánová

CEIBA / IROKO /
SAY-BAH / KANKANTRI

SUZA: The Botanical Garden in Olomouc, where the plants and trees transmit Signals From Roots To Leaves, was founded in the 18th century as a medicinal garden and plant laboratory for the university. Herbal medicine is the oldest form of medicine known to humans. In Europe this knowledge, which is historically female, has been suppressed by the church, the patriarchy and capitalism for hundreds of years. Women* have been dispossessed of their medicinal powers so that this knowledge could be disciplined and monopolised into white male science. Nonetheless, the knowledge of herbalists, medicine women*, healers and witches lives on to this day. It seems that these traditions were kept alive during state socialism and they are still thriving in parts of East and South East Europe. The Botanical Garden in Olomouc is connected to these histories as much as to the cultures, technologies, and bio-politics of colonialism.

Ina, as a healer and a midwife, you live and work closely with plants and their spiritual and healing powers. As a Black feminist you have been actively participating in the international Black feminist movement for many years and have been involved in women*'s and lesbian organisations in the GDR. This connection between plant healing knowledge and Black feminist practices is our topic today. You have chosen the Ceiba tree that grows in the palm house of the Botanical Garden in Olomouc as our third interlocutor for this conversation. The Ceiba is a tree that embodies diverse colonial connections between Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It is also a living archive of cultural ecologies that involve ceiba trees in these various contexts. Before we get to the Ceiba, it would be great to hear about your own history with plants.

INA: Plants and nature itself have always been very important to me. Nature for me is a profound source of power, as is working with plants. It has been like this my whole life. I grew up in East Germany, in the former GDR, as the only Black child in a little town. I spent much



Anna Zemánková

Infinite Flower

first half of 1960s, tempera, pastel and India ink on paper, 84 x 59.5 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková

time in nature with my mother who was a white German woman. She profoundly loved nature and went to the woods regularly. She always took me with her and so did her sisters, my aunts, I grew up among herbs.

In spring, usually around March, we would set off and collect, for example, coltsfoot for colds. There were also linden blossoms, blueberries and wild strawberries. The forest provided healing and also food for us. My mother grew up during the war and the subsequent years and at that time the forest was an important source of food. My mother knew hundreds of mushrooms and she knew when to pick them and how to cook them. I learned all those things from her and my aunts. But we also went to the woods for pleasure. We used to carve little wooden boats and let them drift in the brooks. The forest was a space for relaxation and joy; a place where I was at ease and sensed power. I grew up like this and it's no surprise that I soon started to be interested in medicinal plants. My mother never gave me standard medicine; we handled everything in a natural and organic way. As a kid, my mother thought she was a witch. She was born on April 30th, Walpurgis Night. She hid during those nights because she was scared that she might be burnt at the stake during one of the traditional bonfires.

SUZA: Maybe she had an intuition that the persecution of powerful, opinionated and resistant women* had not ended with witch-hunts.

INA: Yes, she was a witch, and a good one! When she was pregnant with me, she was sure that I would be a boy. I surprised her and had no name for five consecutive days. While she was at the hospital thinking about a name for me, a movie came to her mind about a female healer in the Middle Ages who was later murdered for being a witch. She had a daughter whose name was Ina. Before she was burned at the stake, she gave her daughter to an old woman who knew a lot about medicinal plants; a woman from whom the healer had learned much. This daughter became a midwife and a healer later in the film. It is as though my mother wanted to pass on a legacy with that name. And what have I become? A midwife and a healer. Crazy! At the age of eleven, I told everybody that I would become a midwife and I was already interested in medicinal herbs.

It has always been something very important to me, and it is the same in the context of Black empowerment and dealing with experiences of racism. We talked a lot about the life of Black people and racism in the GDR and after 1989 in our conversation last year.¹

I was politically active at that time, but I also thought there must be a balance. Politics itself is not enough to stay healthy. It is crucial that we get involved politically against racism, homophobia and other forms of oppression. To stay healthy and remain ourselves during all this, which is equally crucial, we should be aware of how we can heal ourselves – and nature is very important in that matter.

① Ina Röder Sisskoko, Suza Husse, Longing is my favorite material for engaging holes. In: Elske Rosenfeld, Suza Husse: wild recuperations. material from below. Dissident Histories from the GDR and pOstdeutschland. Archive Books Milian and Berlin, 2020. pp 304–329.

The wild species of carnation are at home in the lands around the Mediterranean sea. Since ancient times carnation is used in medicinal and ritual/symbolic ways by humans. Carnation can heal sicknesses of the nerves and of the heart, it reliefs fevers, pain, stress, muscle spasms, chest congestions, excessive gas and treats hair and skin problems. The flowers of the carnation plant are solitary, sexually non binary, sweetly scented and have become imbued with anti-hegemonic political symbolism during the 19th and 20th century – they carry feminist, socialist, anti-colonial and revolutionary affiliations as well as traumatic memory (red) and they bloom gender and sexual dissidence (green). The wild carnation is one of a group of medicinal plants that grow across Kurdistan and who make an appearance in Marwa Arsanios' film *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* Part 1 and 2 from 2017/2019. Based on conversations with members of the Kurdish autonomous women*s movement in guerrilla women*s houses in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and a women* only commune in Northern Syria, her film explores the relationships between ideology and living practice, and, ecology as practice and theory.

SUZA: During our conversation last December, you talked about the relationship between self-defence and healing and how you started to organise self-defence training for Black women* and girls* of Colour in the years following 1989. You remembered seeing that everyone brought their own pain and experiences of violence to these training sessions and you realised that this needs a different type of space. You have described healing and rituals to overcome fear and pain as another form of self-defence and political activism. You said that it is important not only to survive but to be healthy enough to live and to love. I like this very much because you look at resistance and oppression in an integrated way, similar to the Kurdish guerrilla fighters that Marwa Arsanios visits in the mountains of North Syria for her movie *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* They see self-defence as an ecological issue that always takes place in interaction with other beings. One of the Kurdish warrior women* said that her first ecological teacher had been her mother, as was yours. Her mother taught her that humans have a place in the world in the same way as trees, birds and mountains do. From this rootedness, being connected, they develop their resistance strategies.

INA: I think self-defence has a lot to do with the feeling that there is worth in being the one I actually am and that I have the right to be this person. If you feel that, then you will find the courage and take action to defend yourself. This first step, self-esteem, self-love, the feeling that it is enough to be you, is so much about healing. Violence, oppression, inequality – are all aimed at destroying people's sense of self-worth. Sadly, it often works. Colonialism is a method of keeping the self-esteem of colonised people low or destroying it completely. So the first thing to do is rebuild that self-esteem. That's where the healing begins and it can take many forms: healing with plants, spirituality, art. If we have enough self-esteem, we can find the right allies. No one can defend themselves on their own.

I really liked what one of the Kurdish women* said in Marwa's movie, that when you are in the natural world, you can feel your place in the universe, you can feel your right to exist. This is the basis on which they organise their resistance. All of this is one. They talk about how oppressing structures aim to separate people from nature because in that way people are more easily manipulated. If people know their place in the universe and are aware that they are as important as a tree or a river, they will stand up for their right to exist with that tree or river.

The way she described this touched me. It was quite an eye-opener for me because she made me understand why resistance is so frequently organised in a natural environment. Nature clearly plays a vital part in their resistance and their lives in the mountains on the border between Iraq and Syria. I can relate to this personally, because I have had very similar experiences as an African German in Germany.



Qirnefil (*dianthus superbus*) in the Botanical Garden of the University Olomouc, November 2020

Photo: Monika Abrhánová



Marwa Arsanios, *Who is Afraid of Ideology?* Part 1 & 2, 2017 and 2019, Still from HD-Video, Single Channel, Colour, Sound, 51 min.

In the natural environment I rediscovered my power, which made it possible again and again to go back to the city to do my job, to go to work and to school. We find the same dynamics in Black people who were brought to the Caribbean or South America as slaves and who managed to flee from the plantations into the mountains to organise their resistance from there. Nature helps everywhere and gives people power, inspiration, and the possibility of self-defence.

SUZA: This aspect, that the self in self-defence is always already many and more than human, is something that moves me a lot in Marwa's film. That it is not a singularity but an interconnected existence that defends itself along with everything it's connected to. I like your idea that the Maroons developed their resistance, their sociality and their economies in radical opposition to those of the plantation, where the people were in communication with the concrete environments where they built their enclaves. To think of rivers, plants, mountains and animals as an integral part of this revolutionary history, which, in Haiti, led to the first large-scale anti-colonial and anti-capitalistic revolution, is beautiful. I find this notion of a resistance which is more than human to be very interesting, also as a philosophical and historical question.

Naomi Rincón Gallardo works in this direction, too, for example with the film "Resiliencia Tlacuache". Tlacuache means opossum in Nahuatl. The film is a kind of queer musical with four main characters and it has motifs from Mesoamerican cosmologies, decolonial feminisms and current resistance movements against ecological destruction, dispossession, and exploitation in South Mexico. One of the characters is an opossum that shares its survival strategy of playing dead when in danger with another protagonist, who is a combination of a cavern deity and a warrior woman* on crutches. The film is dedicated to the Zapotec environmental activist Rosalinda Dionisio Sánchez, who is involved in land defence struggles against multinational mining corporations in Oaxaca. A couple of years ago, she survived an assault where she suffered bullet wounds to her leg. I also read that she was assaulted in a car together with another activist who was killed. For centuries, indigenous, feminist and environmental activists, especially women*, have risked their lives in these battles. I love the scene in Naomi's film where the opossum practises with the cavern deity by the roadside; they show her how to lay still and ways to angle her limbs, so her body looks like it is dead. And then there is also a lot of joy and delight; drinking, dancing and celebrating, which is the work of Agave, the Aztec goddess Mayahuel. The fourth character is a wandering hill, who is also the narrator of the story, which brings us back to mountains as resilient entities.

Our ecological consciousness within the movement evolved within our communal life in these conditions of war. There's always a strong parallel between the massacre of nature and that of women. We, the women's movement, had to protect our existence. [...]

My first ecological teacher was my mother. She taught me that we as humans have a place in nature, like trees and birds. I have the right to exist, like all other species in the same place.

The less people are aware of their links with nature the more likely they are to become liberal individuals which have only loyalty to the state. The more we are connected to nature the more likely we are to be conscious of ourselves in our place in the universe. The state is trying to destroy that connection for itself to be legitimized.

Pelshin in Marwa Arsianos: Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 1 & 2, 2017 and 2019, HD-Video, Colour, Sound, 51 min.

INA: I really like Naomi's film. It is great how she puts traditional knowledge, spirituality, resistance, grief and joy of living into one rich picture. I was also moved by the character of the opossum. I believe plants and animals can be spiritual companions. In the many years of my spiritual work I have come to know the medicine of the opossum very well and it has helped me many times. The opossum is a rather smart and crafty animal, a good strategist and a fantastic actor. When under threat, it plays dead. I read somewhere that it can produce the stench of putrefaction and thus convince the attacker that there's no fight to be had. As soon as the attacker disappears, the opossum springs to its feet and keeps pursuing its aim. Opossums have taught me that sometimes it is a strategic advantage not to immediately enter into direct resistance.

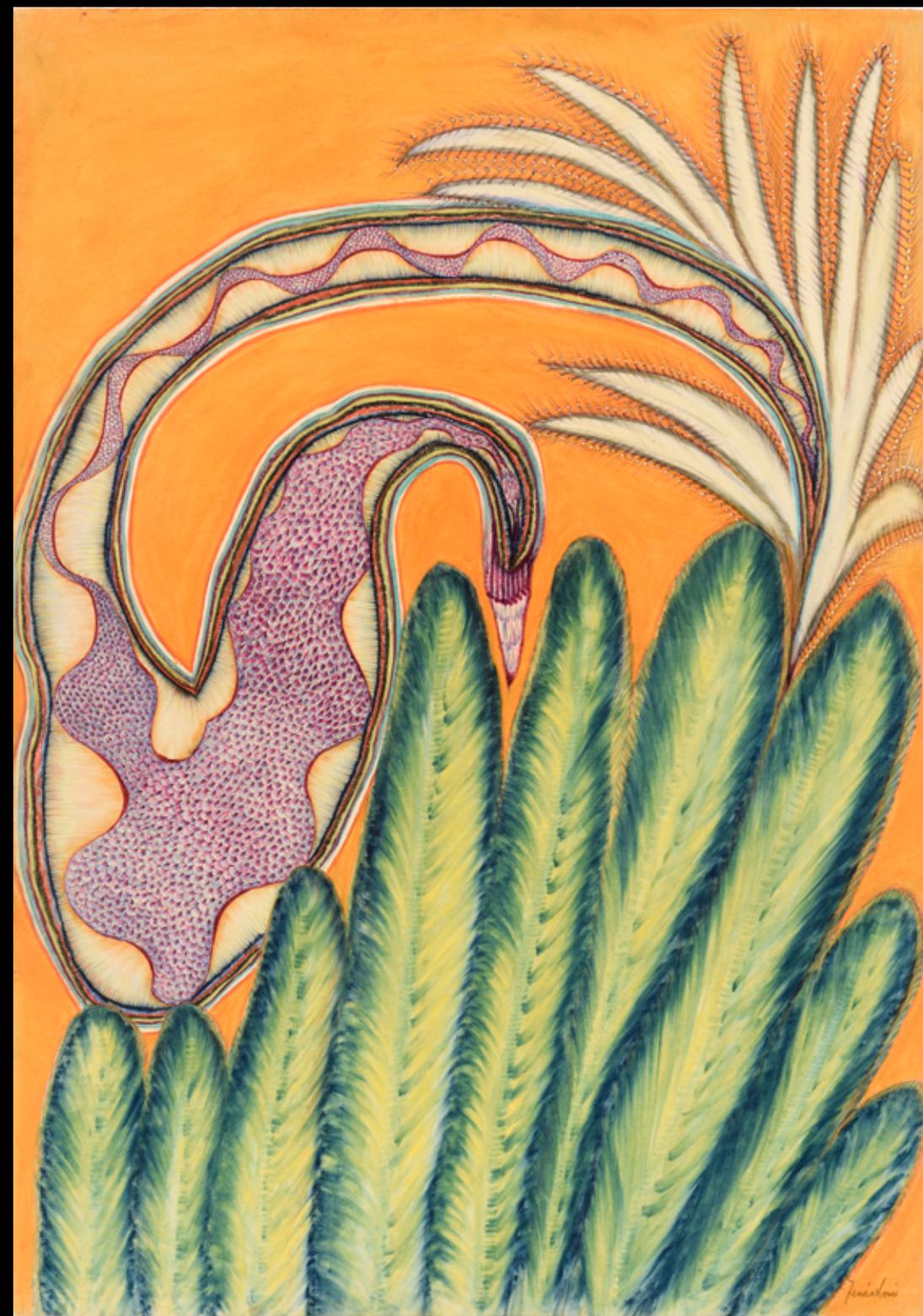
Those Kurdish women say that their power comes from the natural environment and their love of it. We do not sing about the mountains, we sing to them, one of them says. I find this quite beautiful. She makes no division between herself and the mountains; she considers them living beings. In the East German women* and lesbian movement in which I was involved in the 1980s and 1990s, those divisions were very pronounced. There were so-called *Politlesben* (political lesbians) and so called *Spirillesben* (spiritual lesbians). You had the spiritual ones who read tarot cards on one side, and those who organised actions on the other. Somehow there was no way of bridging that divide, at least at that time. But then, you find this same separation everywhere in Western society. What I have in common with the guerrilla warriors singing to the mountains and with the Maroons, is that for us spirituality and politics are one.

SUZA: The wonderful author, thinker and healer Gloria E. Anzaldúa says that in the Western separation between subject and object lies the ground for all violence. These hierarchical binaries created between human and nature, body and mind, man* and woman* are just variations of that same paradigm. As a result, these concepts are charged with these divisions and with this violence. This is why I often struggle with language. I feel that if I say "nature", culturally I locate myself outside of it. But I don't feel that way. It is precisely this distinction that is the stuff the utopia of a tropical greenhouse in a European climate - and the utopia of the plantation system fuelled by the colonial greenhouse laboratory and racist science - are made of. This became clear to me when I spoke to the lead gardener in the palm house in Olomouc. I asked about the impact of climate change on the botanical garden. He said the ecosystems in the greenhouses are not impacted by any change because they were built and designed by humans to be independent of the laws of nature. This idea of utopia is in my mind because the artist Anna Zett considers landfills to be utopian places. Her eclectic documentary *Freiheit 3* (Freedom 3), which is part of *Signals From Leaves*

Anna Zemánková

Snake Hiding Place

1966, pastel and ballpoint pen on paper, 84 x 59.5 cm. Courtesy: Olomouc Museum of Art, Olomouc, Czech Republic, K16313



To *Roots*, has the name of a toxic waste dump in east Germany. In this work Anna combines a visit to this large landfill with a former *Treuhand*² manager with research into the toxic legacies of the Cold War in East Germany, into the GDR's grass roots environmental and democratic movements and into underground poetics from 1986; the year of the Chernobyl disaster. This work made me realise that the greenhouse and the landfill are on different ends of the same utopic spectrum – this utopia of isolation, of boundaries, and of the idea that a place that is not of this world can exist in this world, that the poison would not ooze out at some point.

² *The Treuhand*, engl. faithful hand, or trusty hand, was a state agency founded to oversee the privatisation of the GDR's state owned corporations after 1990.

INA: Let's talk about the Ceiba trees, which are fantastic trees and closely related to the stories we have just been talking about. One of them grows in the palm house in Olomouc. You know that I am a midwife and a herbalist, but I am also a Santera. My religion is Santería, which originates from West Africa and became popular in the Caribbean. In our religion the Ceiba tree plays a vital role. In those places – Nigeria and West Africa as well as the Caribbean and South America – the Ceiba is a sacred tree. It is huge and also has gigantic fanlike roots that sprout out of the ground or crawl over it like big snakes. It is said on both sides of the Atlantic that people can contact their ancestors through the roots of Ceiba trees, and that gods live in their high branches.

Even today during rituals in the Caribbean, the tree is sometimes addressed with its African name, Iroko. This is what the Yoruba people in Nigeria call it. Many Yorubas were enslaved and dragged to the Caribbean. They took their knowledge with them in order to pass it on. The African people met under the Ceiba tree, making rituals and searching for their power. I am quite sure it was there they developed the self-defence strategies that helped them break free from slavery. Thanks to the Ceiba, they were able to stay in contact with their ancestors and with their gods, who live in its crown and trunk. In Santería the gods are called orichas. We believe there are two orichas in the Ceiba tree – Changó and Oyá. Oyá is the goddess of hurricanes and a fearless warrior. Changó is the oricha of fire and lightning and also a warrior. These spirited orichas that dwell within the tree fight side by side against oppression and inequality. This is yet another reason, why the Ceiba is so powerful. People seek power, courage, and support under the Ceiba tree that would help them defend themselves, overcome problems and organise resistance against inequality. I think there is no doubt that the Ceiba tree is a fundamental component of the story of Black resistance in the Caribbean and South America.

To this day, the Ceiba is a sacred tree in the Caribbean and it is prohibited to cut it down. People in communist Cuba and in Puerto Rico often visit the tree in search of inspiration. They always take gifts of fruit, bread or coins. In this way people can give the tree and their

bodies turned inside out like a cave with gemstones ... a new kind of biology whose purpose was to let us know that we were poor inattentive observers ... cosmologies ... ritual of self-preservation ... a sharp point pierces a curve but does not injure it: its concave skilfully expands ... thorns act as teeth, cutting and biting into their own body ... are we seeing skin lesions, moles or tattoos? Close ups of bruises or other marks, various rashes and skin growth ... what looks like a wide open eye might also be a mouth or a scar ...

Eva Kořátková: "That branch looks a lot like that bird," or: Constructing a new nature, in: Anežka Šimková, Terezie Zemánková (eds.): *Anna Zemánková*, Prague, 2017. p. 261-262

ancestors and gods something in return for all the energy and healing they need. The leaves are used for baths and tea-making.

SUZA: This resonance between the tree and the people around it is intriguing. With the constellation of plants, video works, images and conversations in *Signals From Roots To Leaves*, I would like to stretch this connection and speculate a bit about the role of plants as trans*species agents. Plants cogenerate realities in a pluralism of life forms that suspends modern-colonial understandings of life and death, time, space, memory, communication or intention. I think the artist Anna Zemánková, whose images are companions to the project, had a great intuition of these realities and found a language in them to articulate her imagination and inner knowledge in hybrid vegetative shapes. She dreamed through plants. Maybe it's still too anthropocentric, but I wonder what a dream from the other side, from the perspective of the plants, would look like? Could we think about Zemánková's images, the video and films and even our conversation today as dreams of the Agave, Ceiba, Carnation, Giant reeds and Rubber tree in the Botanical Garden?

INA: The Ceiba is connected to the soul, their healing powers operate in this realm. We usually ask the Ceiba to grant us spiritual cleansing and healing. Then, our body can heal too. When people feel unhappy or when their illness has spiritual causes, we go to the tree, get in touch with the ancestors and ask them to heal that person. We use Ceiba leaves in our rituals. The leaves and the bark can be used for special cleansing baths that help you wash away anything you are burdened with. You would also seek out the tree if you need courage to take action.

It is interesting that wherever the tree grows, the rituals are similar. There are many people from Surinam living in the Netherlands and for them this tree is also sacred. They call it Kankantri and it is an important part of their religion, called Winti. This religion originates from West Africa, specifically Ghana. When I was in Puerto Rico, I learned that even in pre-colonial times the tree was sacred for Taíno people. Taíno is how the indigenous people of Puerto Rico call themselves. It is also according to their beliefs that you can get in touch with your ancestors through the roots or with the gods through its canopy. This shows that the tree has its own personality and identical healing powers throughout the world. I thought for a long time that the tree was sacred in the Caribbean because with the incoming African people and their religion everything became confused. In reality though, the same rituals were taking place under the tree long before the era of slavery. People in Nigeria and Puerto Rico developed virtually the same faith independently. This shows that nature is more than just a container, as the Kurdish woman* put it.

Magueys move and multiply by seeds and via clonal mechanisms. They are native to desert and dry ecosystems in Mexico and southern USA where their presence is of deep ecological and spiritual importance. Daughter plants, seeds and stem fragments are carried to new sites by ocean tides, soil movement, and human (dis)placement. First magueys arrived in Europe around 1520, brought back from the colonial invasion of the Americas. Along with colonialism, magueys spread across the tropical and subtropical regions of the world. Only once, at the end of their life cycle do maguey plants bloom. They produce flowers combining multiple genders, which keep the migratory Mexican long nosed bat alive during its journeys across deserts. Within Mesoamerican indigenous cosmologies, the female deity called *Mayahuel* in Nahuatl and the maguey are one. Roots, juice, leaves, flowers, fibres and thorns of the maguey were/are used for medicinal, ceremonial and material purposes. *Agave/Mayahuel* is one of the main characters in Naomi Rincón Gallardo's *Resiliencia Tlacuache (Opossum Resilience)* from 2019 who find themselves in a non-linear temporality upon a landscape threatened by extractivist processes. Together they conjure the *nahuas*, Indigenous protectors of the land, and the intoxicating powers of festivity with the goal of keeping the vital forces aflame in times of danger.

SUZA: I found that the name Ceiba comes from the Taíno language. They call it *say-bah*. I think it is important to learn all those different names because the erasure of those ancient names and thus of the specific cultural and spiritual connections between people and plants they carry, is a defining phenomenon of botany as a colonial science. The renaming and classification of the “discoveries”, or rather of the ignorance of the “discoverers”, was then put into writing and presented as a cultural achievement of the “civilised” world. And this practice has continued right up to the present day. The stories you tell about the role of the Ceiba in the Black and indigenous cultures of the Caribbean are part of the oral traditions and histories that constitute a counter knowledge to colonial botany. This is why it makes me happy to learn that we can pronounce the original Taíno name of the tree. I believe these different names of the Ceiba are traces of the specific resonances, interactions and communications between humans and trees from which languages and cultures emerged in these different places and times.

INA: Yes, we could talk about the connectedness of oral traditions, rituals and medical knowledge for hours. Across many years I have spoken to different people about the tree and what it means to them. For example, in Cuba there is a huge Ceiba just outside Havana. People used to visit the tree, taking gifts and writing their wishes on slips of paper. But the communist regime did not like that and so they built a large fence around the tree. In the countryside, however, there are still many Ceiba trees, especially in the villages. People there still see them as sacred and decorate their branches with colourful ribbons, and lay fruits and other food at their base. People consider them temples. I spoke to a farmer who lived in a house directly next to a very big Ceiba tree. Its branches and leaves stretched all over the garden and its roots were so huge they could easily damage or push out his small Cuban farmhouse. Some of the roots had grown into the shed where he kept his animals. He told me his family has been living there for generations and the shed has had to be moved ten times because of the tree. They would never think that it was the tree that had to move, they would never think of cutting it down. Never.

SUZA: These trees grow so old that they are located in time in a different way to humans. They can help us connect with the various temporal scales of life. Sometimes, when I am under an old tree, I can feel a particular energy, like a field that is held between the roots and the leaves. It makes sense to me that these spaces are temples. How did you find your way to Santería?

INA: Santería is a religion that believes in the power of nature. The orichas, the Santería deities, are actually natural forces. For example, I was initiated into Changó, the oricha of fire and lightning. Then there is Yemaya, the goddess of the sea. Different orichas embody different



Magüey plant (agave americana) in the Palmhouse in the Botanical Garden Olomouc, November 2020

Photo: Monika Abrahánová

Naomi Rincón Gallardo, *Resiliencia Tlacuache (Opossum Resilience)*, 2019. Still from HD-Video, Single Channel, Colour, Sound, 16 min.



Times of war called dispossession

powers and laws of nature. This is why the fact that I was raised in the GDR is not in conflict with the Santería I am today. In Santería, as well as other African and indigenous cultures, ancestors are of great importance and we believe that we all stand on their shoulders. We would not be where we are today if they did not show us the way. As a child, I already felt that they were around me and that they looked after me, and gave me courage and comfort. I have African roots of course, but I was not raised in any African way. I think my mother's love of nature and medicinal plants in combination with my African ancestry had a great influence on me and as a young person I was fascinated by rituals. When I heard about the orichas for the first time, I had to find out more. I was in Venezuela at the beginning of the 1990s to participate in the Black Women Summer Studies. There were many Black women* from all around the world, including South America. I talked with a woman* from Venezuela about spirituality and asked her if she knew Santería. She was initiated in Yemaya and I learned a lot from her. After this encounter I travelled a great deal and met various people who were part of this wonderful religion. I went to Cuba, Puerto Rico and New York, where I was eventually initiated.

SUZA: How does this connection between knowledge of herbal medicine from your East German upbringing as well as the orichas, and the spiritual powers of nature in Santería, play out in your work as a healer?

INA: They are interconnected, just as you described it. I can give you an example from my experience as a midwife. I talked about Oyá, the warrior-goddess who can clear the land with tornadoes and hurricanes. She destroys in order to create new life. Oyá stands for the principle of change and as a goddess of wind she embodies the breath of life. When I assist at a childbirth and a baby is born but not immediately breathing, I do everything that needs to be done from a medical point of view. I bring the respirator and I ventilate the baby. But in my mind, I pray to Oyá. I say to the parents: "Say the name of your baby, out loud. Call your baby!" And in my thoughts, I say to Oyá: "Oyá, please let the breath of life enter this tiny body." The technology of the medical equipment is in no contradiction with spirituality. For me, it is all one. Everything I know comes from what I learned at school, read in books, saw in films and what my ancestors and orichas taught me. I do not separate them; this is simply the way I live.

SUZA: Could you speak some more about the way you use medicinal plants?

INA: What I know about medicinal plants comes mostly from ancient knowledge that, in Europe, was cultivated predominantly by women*. As you were saying earlier, these women*, who knew a lot about herbs, were burned in the Middle Ages as witches. Later, individual components of these medicinal plants were analysed and extracted to make medicine. To some extent this is great, but it makes use of only a small part of the powers that plants have. For me, plants have

**You were born under constant cycles of rains
Seasons of regular harvests
You were upbrought with ancestral knowledge
A world ordered by saint festivities
You learned how to seed the land and to graze
the cattle**

**Sowing pumpkin, maize, beans, chickpeas
And common lands
Among assemblies and collective decisions
Organization of life without political parties**

**Your parents taught you to love the land
That's why you defend it in times of war
In times of war called dispossession
Ecological catastrophe disguised as
development
Extractive industries hiring killers
Destruction of millenary worlds**

Excerpt from the song "Rosy" by Naomi Rincón Gallardo in Naomi Rincón Gallardo: Resiliencia Tlacuache (Opossum Resilience), 2019. Still from HD-Video, Colour, Sound, 16 min.

personalities, but I already said that. They are living beings. Sure, the Nettle contains a lot of iron and cleanses the body and we can use her for that. But she can do way more. On a different level, she can teach us much about pugnacity, self-assertion and claiming your own space. Another example is the Vervain (*Verbena officinalis*), which is one of my favourite herbs for women.

When I put herbs together for one person with a specific problem, I first consider plants that match their symptoms. But to effectively help them, it's not enough just to look at the components of the plants. I have to make a connection with the person and ask myself whether a particular plant is a match for their personality and their condition. Once, I was in Switzerland on vacation and I met a woman* who told me that she had lost a lot of blood during labour. A year had passed since then but she felt she was never the same after childbirth. They had not given her any blood at the hospital and had told her she would be able to recover on her own. That year she struggled with fatigue and lack of energy and she also had depression. Her GP detected that her level of HB, haemoglobin, was very low, but did not prescribe any medication. The day after this conversation I was walking in the mountains and thinking about what herbs might help her. Suddenly, I saw a plant that is usually quite unremarkable and easy to overlook – the Vervain. It has small, purple-coloured blossoms and it was as if they all looked up to me and called me: “It's me, she needs me.” Of course, I thought to myself, this is the one. Vervain is not used that often in Western herbalism anymore. But in earlier times it was an important herb used to fight anaemia because of its ability to raise the level of haemoglobin in blood. It also gives you power and courage, makes you resistant and brings vitality. Plants are effective on so many levels – physically and mentally.

In the past, Vervain was used in rituals that were meant to give people courage, and it was drunk as a tea. It was also burned as incense and put in baths. Our life-power is centred in our blood. Blood gives us energy and fire and contains our will. When people have anaemia, it weakens their will to live. Postnatal depressions often come from anaemia. Sadly, this is all rather neglected in Western medicine. When I started to work in the Netherlands as a midwife, the HB level that was used for diagnosing anaemia and prescribing iron was officially lower for Black people than it was for white people. But Black people actually do suffer from anaemia more often than white people because they might have sickle-cell anaemia, and women* of African descent frequently have myomas. Myomas can cause anaemia in the long run because women often have heavy periods and lose a lot of blood. They start to lose their life-power little by little. They become increasingly fatigued and might even feel depressive. Because this comes unnoticed, it is usually not attributed to anaemia. Those Black women* who were told their HB levels are all right, often felt tired, had much less energy, and felt less powerful and optimistic. When they came to me in situations like this, I would usually give them Vervain to strengthen the blood and other things. I have seen them becoming stronger and happier, and their willpower rising. This particular Dutch



Anna Zemánková

Electrical Fruit

second half of 1960s, paper cut out on spray painted paper, 93,5 x 68,5 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková

HB protocol has been modified in recent years, but ten years ago it was still in use. This is an example of how medicine is directly linked to politics.

SUZA: ... and of how academic medicine is a means of disabling, literally disempowering, the life and agency of particular peoples, based on race and gender. I am shocked by this practice. It shows how deep these racist and patriarchal structures really run. It also shows how existential it is to have health practitioners who are not white and cis-male and who bring a different focus, a different agenda, and run their own spaces and practices, like you. You have been centring the physical and spiritual wellbeing of Black women* and women* of Colour in your practice for a long time.

INA: Yes, this is an important focus in my work. But it is not the only one. My concern is the health of everyone who comes to me – Black women*, white women*, Turkish, Dutch, Moroccan women*, men*, people of different gender identities – it doesn't matter. Because I live in a neighbourhood with many Black women*, I see a lot of them in my office. This is beautiful, but what is really important to me is to be aware of the differences. The more I am aware of them, the better I can tailor the therapy to the special needs of that person.

SUZA: I would like to speak with you about the menopause. While doing my research for the project, I came across an interesting artist, Anna Zemánková. She comes from Olomouc and was a self-taught artist. In her 50s she started to produce incredible speculative-spiritual drawings, which I would call post-botanical. That was at the end of the 1950s in Czechoslovakia and until her death in the 1980s she did some amazing work. I like to think she also might have spent some of her childhood and youth in the Botanical Garden in Olomouc and maybe something from the plants moved into her. There are certainly interesting overlaps between plant-speculative motives in her art, her ritual and self-healing art practice – she supposedly woke up every day between 3 and 4 a.m. to document her visions, her lucid dreaming – and the fact that she started her career during her menopause. I read somewhere that many women* among the so-called Outsider Artists, much like Zemánková, started to make art during their menopause or around that period in their life.

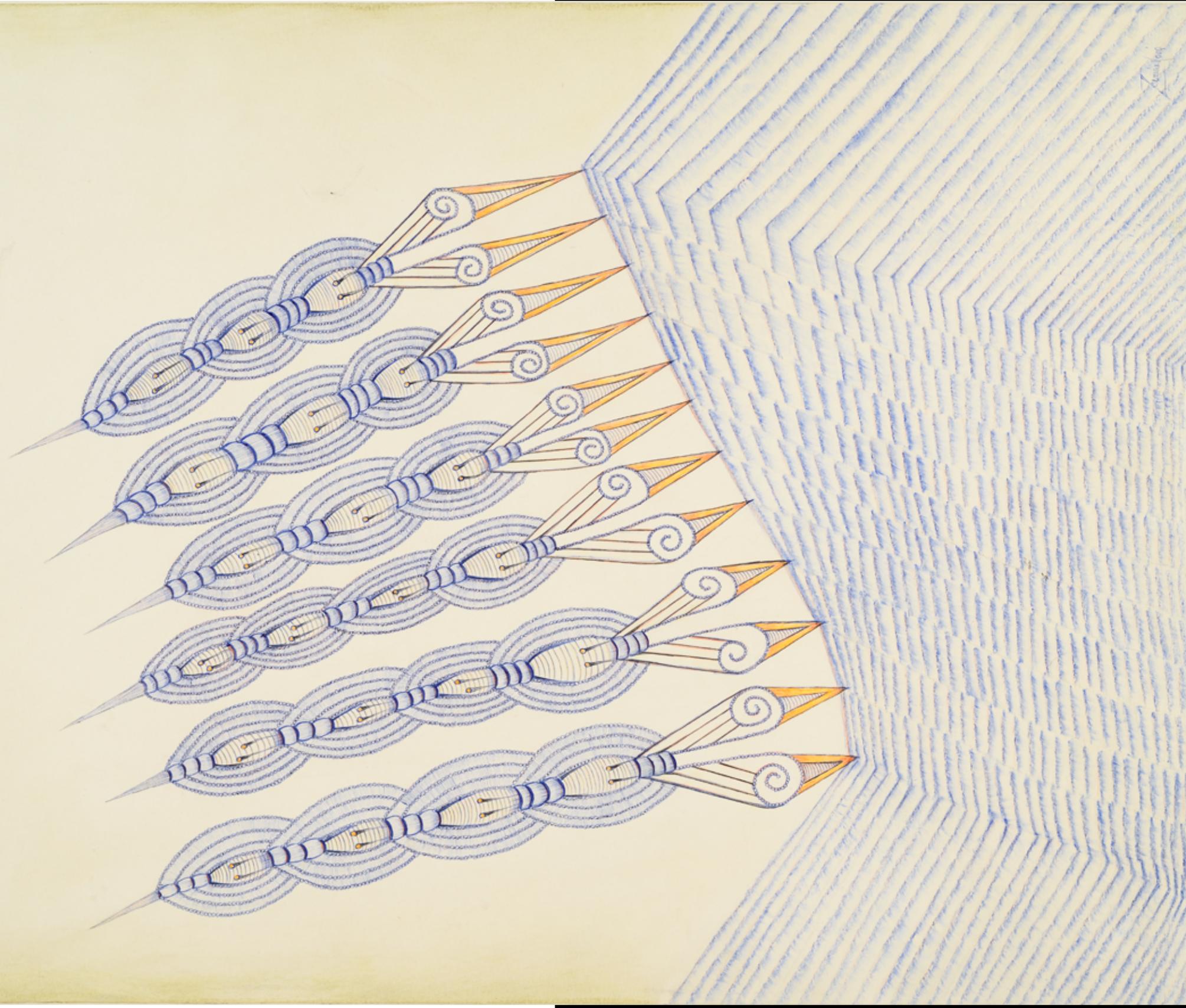
INA: What do you mean by Outsider Artists?

SUZA: Artists whose work is categorised to be outside the professional art system, who do not have a formal art education and make art under the radar of the official art circles. I would say it's a category similar to that of craft, where we would find a lot of practices by those who were

Anna Zemánková (born 1908 in Olomouc, died 1986 in Prague) was a self-taught artist who worked in drawing, painting, textiles, embroidery, collage and creating installations and environments in her Prague family home. From the late 1950s until the end of her life she created exuberant imaginaries of post-botanical bodies, interspecies spiritual shapes and erotics, and bio-machinic life forms and architectures. Zemánková's body of work carries resonances from a spectrum of cultural references and practices such as Moravian spiritual and spiritualist traditions and Central European Cubism, socialist Science Fiction and space travel, classic music, Moravian folk aesthetics and practices, botanical literature and gardens as well as her own numerous house plants, vegetal aesthetics of Art Nouveau and Baroque, experiences of illness and loss, her training and work as a dental technician and assembly worker in a keypunch machine factory, or her involvement and friendship with a younger generation of artists who studied in the mid to late 1960s in Prague. Having lived through a changing political landscape of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, two world wars, the German fascist occupation and socialist Czechoslovakia under Soviet rule, Zemánková's hybrid aesthetics are documents of what it meant to "inhabit the spaces we call woman" (Lidia Yuknavitch) in a post-imperial, totalitarian hetero-patriarchal environment.

I am always with You on a cosmic ship /
bearing the weight of the matrix, holding
it tightly in my hands like the roots of
a mandrake.

Slavomir Zemánek in a letter to Anna Zemánková, 1966 quoted in Terezie Zemánková: Anna, in: Anežka Šimková, Terezie Zemánková (eds.): Anna Zemánková, Prague, 2017. p.14



first half of 1970s, colored pencil, ballpoint pen and acrylic on paper, 62 x 45 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková

Anna Zemánková

Untitled

and often still are not the ones making the rules concerning what art is: women*, queers, people with disabilities, Black people and people of colour, working class, impoverished and nomadic people, non-Europeans etc. I would like to know how you work with the menopause as a healer and what you think about the phenomenon of menopausal art.

INA: Menopause is, in my opinion, a very important period in the life of a woman*. It is a time of big transformation. I also practise acupuncture, and in traditional Chinese medicine it is said that there are two or three golden portals every woman* has to go through in her life. These golden portals are a metaphor for transformations that allow a person to grow. The first golden portal is the beginning of the menstrual cycle. The second is experienced by women* who give birth. Women* pass through the third golden portal when their menopause begins. These transformative thresholds are considered to be important opportunities to grow personally, to become yourself and be creative. In the Western world however, the menopause is seen in very negative terms – you abdicate from being a woman*.

SUZA: Maybe that can be quite liberating, too, I mean to relinquish the space that we call woman*. When years ago I told my mother that I loved a woman*, she responded as a reflex and said: “Oh, that means you have zeroed your social value.” This is how she was socialised in the GDR. On the other hand, she created an amazing imaginary world of witches for my sister and I when we were young. But yes in that moment, for her, I had resigned as a woman* because I would let my uterus lay barren or even grow wild. What is the second golden portal for people like me, whose “social value”, and ecological value, too, would be defined by living otherwise, by not having children, if I were to stay in my mother’s productivist perspective? Could their queerness and resistance against the hetero regime be this second portal, too? It is definitely transformative.

INA: If we keep the metaphor of three golden portals, it might seem that women* who have no children miss one of the possibilities to grow. But this is not true. In traditional Chinese medicine, the essence of life –Jing – is crucial. There are many ways to substantiate it, and childbirth (the second golden portal) is only one of them. All women* can achieve that through everything that gives them fulfilment, such as creativity and art.

Let’s circle back to the menopause. We said that in traditional cultures, it is considered a golden portal: Some things you simply leave behind and make space for something new. If we look at it from the hormonal point of view, levels of oestrogen and progesterone are sinking and, in relation to that, testosterone becomes stronger. All women* have testosterone in their bodies, even before their menopause. The so-called feminine hormones, oestrogen and progesterone, make humans caring, considerate and thoughtful,



Giant reeds (arundo donax) in the Subtropical Greenhouse of the Botanical Garden Olomouc, November 2020

Photo: Monika Abrahámová

Giant reeds have been cultivated in damp soils of temperate, subtropical and tropical regions of both hemispheres. They reproduce vegetatively by tough, fibrous underground rhizomes that form knotty, spreading mats which spread deep into the soil – their big feathery plumes are infertile because the megaspore mother cell resists division. Through their rhizomes symbiotic relationships with fungi are maintained, which elevate their potential to translocate heavy metals (arsenic, cadmium, lead and others) from roots to shoots and to accumulate them in the stalk and leaves without intoxicating themselves. Their canes contain silica and have been made into tools, prosthesis, architectures and musical instruments since thousands of years. The ancient peoples of North Africa wrapped their dead in the leaves.

Because of their ability to live within highly contaminated soils and detoxify them to considerable degrees, reeds survive by toxic lakes and rivers and are often planted around landfills. In Anna Zett’s eclectic documentary *Freiheit 3* (Freedom 3) from 2020 addressing the toxic remains of the German ex-country GDR, history assumes the shape of a dump – which is surrounded and processed by reeds.

while testosterone gives willpower, self-assertion and power. With the hormonal shift in the menopause, women* are more likely to do what they really feel like doing and to go their own way. They don't care so much anymore about what other people think about them and they do what fulfils them. That is a great opportunity for women* if they manage to find the positive aspects in this transformation and use the energy that is being generated. I suppose this is one of the reasons that Anna Zemánková and similar artists* started to create art during their menopause. Sadly, Western medicine is oriented on prescribing numerous hormone supplements. Women* are given synthetic oestrogen that increases the risk of breast cancer and completely blocks this natural transition; something which should be happening. For this reason, this type of therapy often creates many more problems than it solves. Many women* suffer from depression because of it.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, it is the Yin that is weakening during menopause. Yin is substance and matter. Yang is the motion energy – change and fire. Yin is getting weaker because the ovaries stop producing oestrogen and progesterone during menopause. We have less matter. If we have been overexploiting our own energy, we will have a weak base for this transformation, because we need substance to control our motion energy, to create balance. This is where issues such as distress, insomnia and hot flashes come from. Therefore, it is very important to pay attention in advance to your energy levels and your body's reserves. The way you live before the menopause will determine your menopause. I always recommend women* in their 30s to take good care of their energy, to eat healthily, sleep long enough, drink less coffee and not do ten things simultaneously. In this way you can balance your body energy and go easily through this process, this transition.

SUZA: I like the relationship between matter and transformation because it seems like a much more fluid perspective. How do you, as a gynaecologist, handle the open spectrum of gender identities?

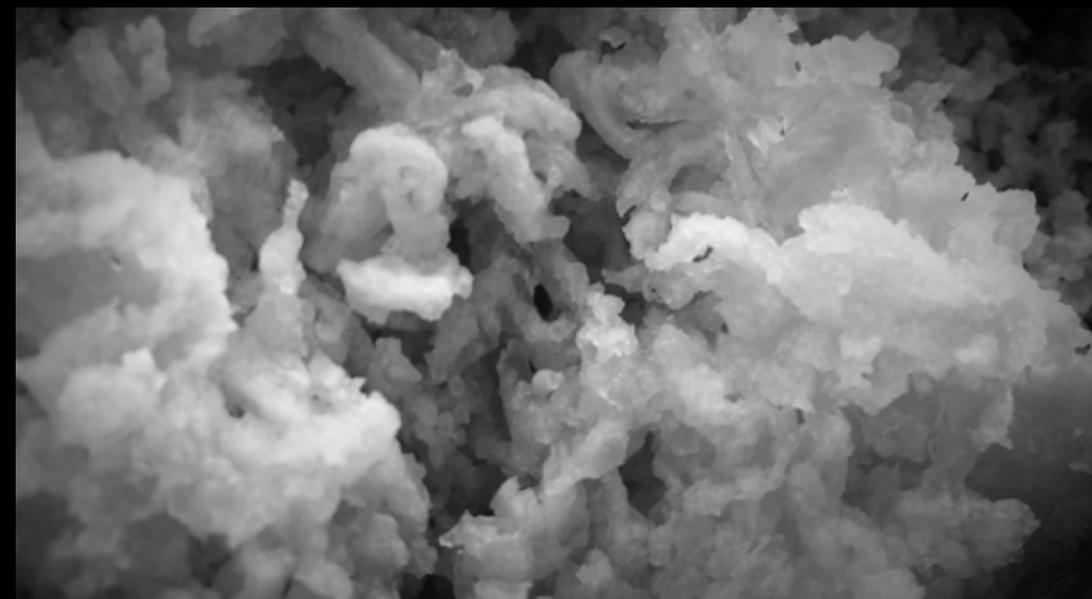
INA: I do have a lot of female patients. But I leave it up to everyone to define themselves. I let people come, tell their stories, say who they are and what they need. As a midwife I work mostly with pregnant women* and these kinds of conversations are rare. But there are also lesbian couples in my practice, where one of the partners* identifies as non-binary or trans.

SUZA: Are there particular medicinal plants that you use for people in their menopause or is it always dependent on their Yin and Yang constellation?

INA: It depends on the person. We are all different – there are calm and reserved people but also energetic ones that can be easily enraged by anything and always have to make a point. Everyone has different menopauses and different disbalances. I do not have any



Anna Zett, Freiheit 3 (Freedom 3), 2020, Still from HD-Video, Single Channel, Colour, Sound, 30 min.



Phuong Linh Nguyen, Memory of the Blind Elephant, 2016, Still from HD-Video, Single Channel, Colour, Sound, 14:27 min.

standard set of herbs for menopause, but of course, there are many herbs that are typically used for women*, such as Lady's mantle, Chaste tree, Black cohosh, Pasque flower, Yarrow, Motherwort and Oat (*Avena sativa*). Each herb has its own personality and I always make a specific mixture of them for a specific person.

Generally, natural medicine tends to strengthen the Yin, or the matter, in menopause. I give my patients dietary guidelines and tell them to go sleep before midnight because this is when we rebuild our reserves. I also use acupuncture. But most importantly I support women* to love and accept themselves, which brings us back to the beginning of our conversation. I encourage them to ask themselves: "What can I do? What fantastic opportunities does this new phase yield?" In traditional cultures, women* in their menopause are considered wise and of high status and can do things that women* prior to menopause cannot.

Which brings to mind two more menopausal herbs: One is, of course, sage and the other is rose, which can be used as an essential oil or in tea. Rose is a very important flower for woman*hood. Rose oil is extremely precious and expensive, but you only need a small drop to heal someone. Rose is one of the best herbs if you want to strengthen your sense of self-worth, Therefore it is vital for women* in their menopause who often struggle with their self-esteem. I also use or recommend rose oil for women* who have experienced sexual violence and feel soiled or broken by such an experience. A Rose can heal this because of the strong connection it has to the heart, to the heart chakra, the centre of self-love.

SUZA: What personality does Sage have?

INA: Sage is a plant that helps you know and honour your boundaries. Sage constricts body tissues and is therefore used for hot flashes and sweating. Sage keeps you compact, leads you and others to respect your limits. You know, women* often flow along with others, are porous to others, and because of that they are more prone to care for them, which is exactly what is expected from them in society. So if you do not know where your boundaries are, you simply give your energy away. Sage helps you see where you begin and end, so that you can take care of your energy and make sure it is not sucked dry by others. All this happens on an energetic-spiritual level but sage also helps you physically because it slows down perspiration. If you sweat a lot, your body loses minerals and gets weaker.

SUZA: Do you have your own herb garden?

INA: Yes, we are lucky to have our own garden with my favourite herbs and trees. The most remarkable thing about our garden is that every year a new plant just wanders in. Two years ago it was St. John's wort, a plant that usually grows wild in the dunes. Suddenly the garden was full of it, even though I had done nothing. I collected it and made oil from it. I thought there must be a reason for it to have come. Later



Đa búp đỏ (*Ficus elastica*) in the Palmhouse in the Botanical Garden Olomouc, November 2020

Photo: Monika Abrahámová

Đa búp đỏ translates as red buds. They belong to a community of fig trees whose survival depends on symbioerotic relationships with a species of wasp. Their aerial roots can bridge chasms and heal wounds in interaction with human hands. Medicine is made from their fruits, leaves, sap, bark and rootlets to relief pain and inflammation, to cure mouth sores and parasitic diseases, to heal rashes, warts and corns. In the grammar of extraction of European imperial languages, *Đa búp đỏ* as well as the amazonian *Sharinga* are called rubber trees. Natural latex, the milky white substance that runs through them, became a material condition for the techno-industrial-military complex of colonial modernity. Botanical gardens in the colonial metropolises and in the colonized "peripheries" cultivated and tested both species serving as nodes in the imperial circuits of knowledge during the so-called rubber boom in late 19th and early 20th century.

The palm house in botanical garden in Olomouc hosts a big old *Đa búp đỏ*. When it was built in 1926 and 1927 large territories of the trees native ecology in South East Asia and the Indian subcontinent had been turned into rubber plantations. During those same years death rates among workers in some of the biggest French colonial plantations in Vietnam reached 47%. Set in the haunting space of an ex-colonial rubber plantation in Central Vietnam, *Phuong Linh Nguyen's* film *Memory of the Blind Elephant* from 2016 is a tender portrait of the complex economies of interspecies trauma and resilience in the face continued extraction and destruction.

I heard that one of our friends was diagnosed with cancer and was going to radiotherapy. As soon as he finished the therapy, I gave him the oil to tend to his wounds. It was very helpful. Another time, Valerian came to my garden and I had no idea what to do with such a lot of it. I dried it and made a tincture out of its roots. What happened next? My partner suffered from sleeping problems and the Valerian tincture helped her. Plants help us if we learn to understand their language.

Ina Röder Sissoko, Ceiba and Suza Husse
Almere, Olomouc and Berlin, November 2020

This publication is part of *D'EST Chapter #7: Signals From Roots To Leaves: A Post-botanical Assembly* curated by Suza Husse with and for Maguey (Agave), Ceiba, Qirnefîl (Carnation), Riesenschilf (Giant reed) and Đa búp đở (Rubber tree) in the Botanical Garden Olomouc.



Anna Zemánková

A Film About Lenin –
Nadezhda Krupskaya

late 1970s/early 1980s, satin collage, textile paint, pastel and ballpoint pen
on paper, 62,5 x 45 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková

Anna Zemánková

Untitled

first half of 1960s, tempera, pastel and India ink on paper,
84 x 59.5 cm. Courtesy: family collection / Terezie Zemánková

