

NETS OF HYPHAE

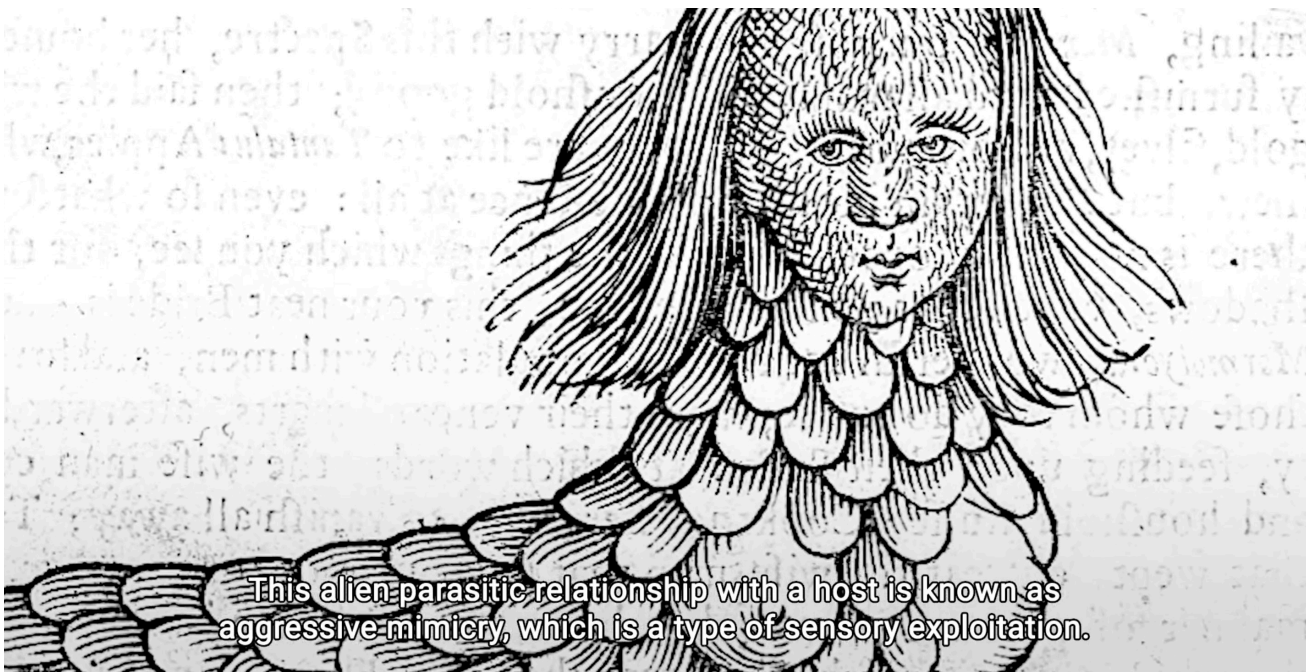
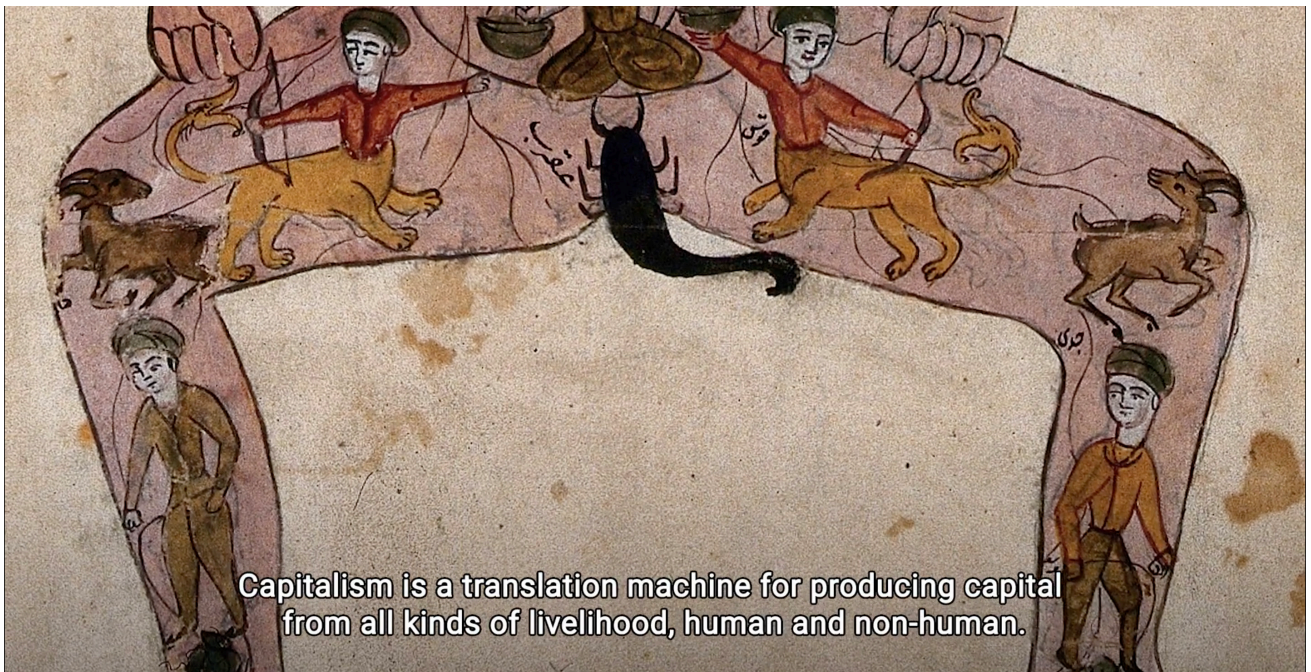
Diana Policarpo

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Diana Policarpo, *Bosch's Garden*, 2020

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Claviceps purpurea is an ergot fungus that grows on the tips of rye and similar cereals. The fungus takes over the plant's ovary and entangles itself with the conducts that feed the developing seed. At first, contamination takes the shape of a white tissue, to later turn into a compact mass of sclerotium or hardened mycelium—the root-like structure of a fungus composed of long, branching filaments called hyphae. Inside, a concoction of alkaloids and lipids is formed. If used wisely, it has medicinal properties that were applied historically by womxn to womxn¹ for reproductive health. If ingested in too much of a quantity, it produces convulsive and hallucinogenic effects, which were notably suffered throughout Europe in the Middle Ages in mass poisonings, thought to be caused by devil-worshipping and witchcraft.

In *Nets of Hyphae*, Diana Policarpo departs from the study of the ergot fungus as a historical catalyst, for both its intoxicating and healing properties. In the exhibition, ergot outlines genealogies of womxn knowledge and struggle throughout centuries, and it valuably elucidates on the subjugation of the bodies of people with uterus for the consolidation of capitalism as a totalising regime, encapsulating economic, social, and cultural structures. Through an array of video, drawings on silk, multi-channel sound, and light, Policarpo lays out a sensorial schema that offers a synesthetic experience of the ergot mushroom as a storytelling device, with its multiple hyphae as narrative arcs that disseminate accounts of feminist and class resistance.

Previous to her research on ergot, Policarpo traced the global supply chain of *Cordyceps*, a parasitic fungus found across the Himalayas that infects insects and that has a long medicinal history given its benefits on longevity, libido, cancer, and insomnia, among other claims. The result of her preliminary study on *Cordyceps* was *Death Grip* (2019), a video animation and sound installation commissioned by The Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) in Lisbon. The handicaps in further researching and traveling, brought along by Covid-19 pandemic made it unfeasible to continue exploring *Cordyceps*. Instead, Policarpo veered towards a more situated and localised knowledge about ergot, inspired by the presence of the fungus in the stories of Portuguese women farmers throughout history, to afterwards expand the study of its economy and epidemics on a global level. The prolific feminist assemblages that emerged in her research constitute this exhibition, the artist's first in The Netherlands.

Throughout the Middle Ages there were many accounts of ergotism epidemics, causing pain and frenzy in people who had ingested contaminated fermented foods such as bread, porridge, and beer. The infection caused gangrene and produced convulsions that often resulted in dementia, psychosis, and hallucinations. Popularly known as Saint Anthony's fire—as the monks of the Order of Saint Anthony became adept at treating the disease—ergotism was understood as a kind of demonic possession.

In *Bosch's Garden* (2020), Policarpo offers an in-depth look at Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1501), which is argued to likely transpose the life of the saint in an epidemic of ergotism contemporary to the artist. This hypothesis is not only supported by the references to fire in the painting—alluding to the colloquial name of the disease—but also by the inclusion of a mandrake from which an entourage of monsters emerge. The most common way that ergotism was treated was with mandrake, the root of a mandragora plant. Named after the similitude of the root with a human body shape, mandrake, both a narcotic and a hallucinogen, was extensively used in medieval times to cure all kinds of ailments, as it was believed that herbs that resembled certain parts of the body could cure the counterpart human organ or limb. In the animation of the triptych, Policarpo zooms in and out of the panels, directing our attention to characters and details that altogether stand as a unique visual document of ergotism and its contributions to the collective imagery of the time.

The widespread epidemics of ergotism between the 14th and the 16th centuries coincide with the gradual establishment of mercantile capitalism in Europe. Feudalism was failing due to constant revolts and conflicts by the peasantry, who sought to protect their communal goods and better their economic and juridical rights. On top of it, the bubonic plague popularly known as Black Death brought about a devastating decimation of the population in Northern Africa and Eurasia from 1346 to 1353, causing the death of thirty to sixty percent of the European population². Paired with the grave demographic crisis, the constant instability between social classes was countered by a political and jurisdictional campaign orchestrated by the ruling class, the Church, and an incipient bourgeoisie. As a result, the proletarianisation of the peasantry and the destruction

¹ The term womxn is used, especially in intersectional feminism, as an alternative spelling to avoid the suggestion of sexism perceived in the sequences m-a-n and m-e-n, and to be inclusive of trans and nonbinary women.

² "The Black Death: The Plague, 1331-1770", Iowa University, accessed August 2022, <http://hosted.lib.uiowa.edu/histmed/plague/>

of the commons began to unfold throughout the continent. Working people saw their rights being stripped away, as they started being considered as a form of power to be economically rendered in its totality. Under these terms, womxn were considered key to demographic stability and therefore needed for the continuous reproduction of labour. Any kind of opposition posed a threat to the capitalist agenda. Therefore, a progressive subjugation over their bodies and the denigration of their place within 'modern' society started to take place³.

The Oracle (2020) dives deeper into the stories associated with ergot: from its use in the Eleusinian Mysteries for the cult of Demeter and Persephone in Ancient Greece, to the visionary theology of the polymath Hildegard of Bingen, to its medicinal use in midwifery for abortions and to treat postpartum bleeding. Policarpo threads the stories of the use of ergot with a rich collection of archival images from her research. They are stories of visibility, but also of vanishment, as ergot and other herbal knowledge disappeared in birth assistance as midwives were gradually banned within the states' schema to subdue women's bodies and assure their function as bearers of future labourers. Male doctors took over what was historically a womxn's practice of aid, solidarity, and knowledge exchange, and 'modern' medicine and its new technology replaced the healing powers of plants. There was little to no consent given in many surgical experiments to develop it, oftentimes performed on racialised womxn. James Marion Sims, considered the 'father of gynaecology,' explicitly denied any interest in womxn's health, deliberately ignored historical feminine knowledge, and performed abhorrent operations without anaesthesia on enslaved black womxn, who could not consent nor refuse due to their social status. The testimony of one of them, Anarcha, is featured in *The Oracle*.

It is no coincidence that in the mid-15th century, a time of deep class struggles and revolts, epidemics, and the collapse of feudalism, the first witch trials took place. The obliteration of the commons through land privatisation, the monetisation of labour, increased taxation and resulting famine, and the stealthy control of all manifestations of social life by the joint efforts of state, church, and bourgeoisie, created the favourable conditions to persecute and prevent any manifestation of insurgence. Witch-hunts, which sought to criminalise any potential attempt to thwart the disciplining of capitalism and attack womxn's ability to resist it by virtue of their sexuality, control over reproduction, and non-rationalistic medicinal knowledge, were instrumental to the establishment of a patriarchal order⁴. As Silvia Federici argues, "Witch-hunt was, at least in part, an attempt to criminalise birth control and place the female body, the uterus, at the service of population increase and the production and accumulation of labour-power."⁵ About one hundred thousand people in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, mostly women, were in trial for magic. Almost half were convicted to death, usually burnt at the stake.

Policarpo's research on ergot also takes the shape of a soundscape that resonates throughout the exhibition. *Drift* (2020) is a sonic composition made in collaboration with multi-instrumentalist Edward Simpson. Using contact microphones, synthesisers, and field recordings, the soundscape imbues the space with mycorrhizal frequencies. The work incites an additional sensorial experience of ergot that allows for a more intimate, irrational attunement with the fungal realm, sharpening our listening abilities and pushing the limits of embodiment and perception⁶. The tingling electroacoustic reverberations frame *Bodies We Care For* (2020), a series of prints depicting fictional hybrid organisms that merge plants, fungi, female reproductive organs, and gynaecological tools. Bathed in the oneiric purplish hues of the light installation—reminiscent of the colour of the ergot fungi's poisonous horns—the sheer fabrics stand in vicinity of *Infected Ear* (2020), a digital animation displaying the life cycle of ergot's hyphae.

Following with the chronologies of ergot throughout the exhibition, *Cyanovan (Protocol)* (2020) forwards the heritage of womxn's knowledge on reproductive health to contemporary times exemplified in the transhackfeminist practice of Paula Pin. Transhackfeminism is a form of hacking that seeks to critically assess hegemonic narratives around technologies, the understandings of modernity that they bring about, and their inherent use as instruments for the development of capitalism. As seen in *The Oracle*, the development of scientific rationalisation was closely entangled with the efforts by the state to impose its control over a society that was reluctant to their transformation into mere workforce⁷.

Policarpo spent time with Pin in her nomad laboratory in Galicia, Spain, to witness and participate in the development of self-managed gynaecological technologies such as portable microscopes, 3D-printed medical tools, and other kinds of protocols, which are created in collectivity, open-source, and for free. Together in Pin's blue van—hence the title of the film—they work on the extraction and

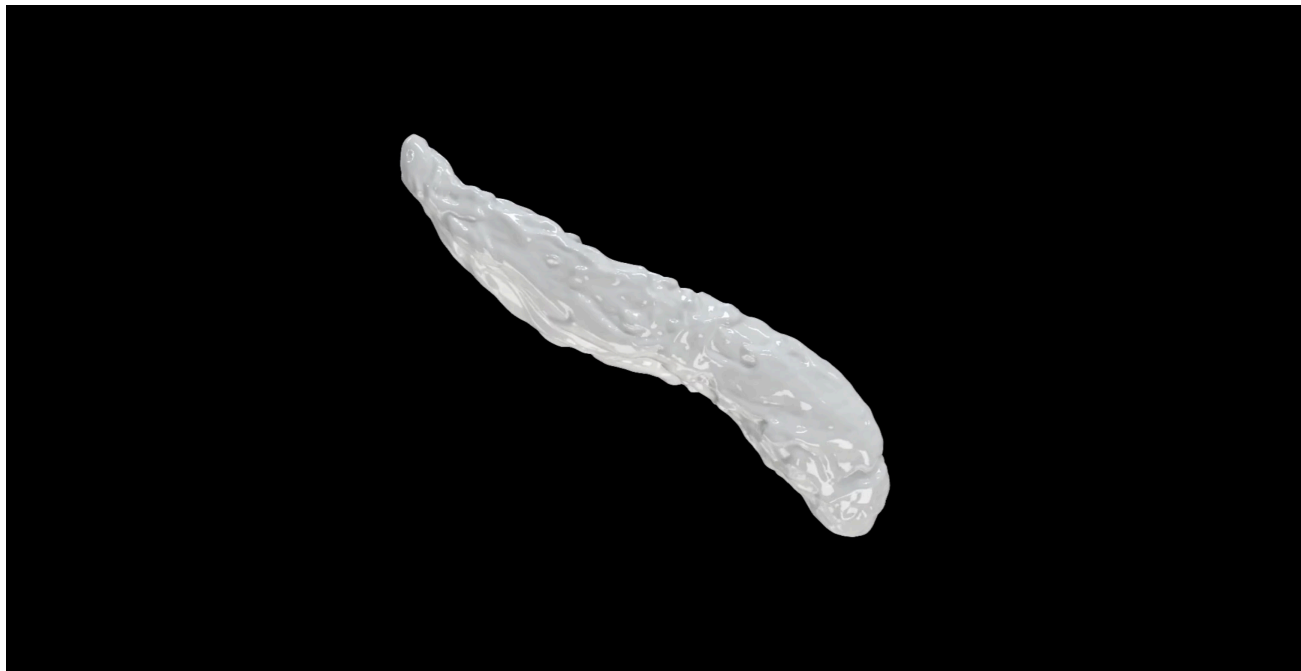
3 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch. Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004, p. 97

4 Ibidem, p. 170.

5 Ibidem, p. 183.

6 Margarida Mendes, "Sonic Alchemy", in Diana Policarpo: *Nets of Hyphae*, ed. Stephanie Hessler, Milan: Mousse Magazine, p. 111.

7 Federici, 145.



separation of some properties of the fungus for medicinal purposes. As they run the experiment, Policarpo and Pin converse on the co-existence between species. As Pin muses in the film, “mushrooms have never been recreational, but rather they are about reconnecting with the Earth.”

In times of regression in reproductive rights around the world, Diana Policarpo’s work galvanises a compromised awareness of the ancient synergies between people and what the land yields to them, the historical processes of disenchanting the world for the establishment of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’, and the rendering of disenfranchised bodies as labour-power for economic expansion and stability. Bodies with uteruses—encompassing cisgender women, non-binary, and transgender bodies—have long been policed and subdued under many rhetorical disguises so as to uphold a classist, racist, and patriarchal status quo for the prosperity of capitalism. The acknowledgement that the subjugation of these bodies, with their labour, sexual, and reproductive powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources centuries ago, and that we presently live in the active foundations of that system, is the beating heart of *Nets of Hyphae*. Diana Policarpo exposes the ties between gender politics, economic structures, health struggles, and interrelations among species, unearthing the embroiled threads of ergot and history.

Diana Policarpo is a visual artist and composer based between Lisbon and London. She works in visual and musical media including drawing, video, sculpture, text, performance, and multi-channel sound installation. Policarpo investigates gender politics, economic structures, health, and interspecies relations through speculative transdisciplinary research. She creates performances and installations to examine experiences of vulnerability and empowerment associated with acts of exposing oneself to the capitalist world.

Her work has been exhibited worldwide including solo presentations at Kunsthall Trondheim; Galeria Municipal do Porto; Centro de Artes Visuais, Coimbra; Galeria Lehman + Silva, Porto; Belo Campo/Galeria Francisco Fino, Lisbon; GNRtion, Braga; IAB Artists Unlimited, Bielefeld; Kunstverein Leipzig; Xero, Kline and Coma, London; Kunsthall Baden-Baden, among others. Policarpo has recently exhibited, performed and screened her work at st_age (Thyssen- Bornemisza Art Contemporary); Maus Hábitos, Porto; Interstício, London; Nottingham Contemporary; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Elvas (MACE); ARCOMadrid; Chiado 8, Lisbon; Kunsthall Oslo (with Marie Kolbæk Iversen); LUX - Moving Image, London; Cafe OTO, London; Guest Projects, London; Tenderpixel, London; Schau Fenster, Berlin; Mars Gallery, Melbourne; Peninsula Gallery, New York; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and W139, Amsterdam. She was the winner of Prémio Novos Artistas Fundação EDP 2019.

Nets of Hyphae finds its fourth iteration at RADIUS after being exhibited in Galeria Municipal do Porto (PT), Kunsthalle Trondheim (NO), and CRAC Occitanie (FR).

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NETS OF HYPHAE
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so the process of alkaloid extraction will facilitate.



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of the parasite's cycle with the fungus
and how this plant is related to women's health.