

# Eyes as Big as Plates

*Karoline Hjorth & Riitta Ikonen*

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery  
January 28 through April 13, 2025



*Bob II (New York 2013)*





# Introduction

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*Eyes as Big as Plates* began in 2011 as a collaborative project between Finnish-Norwegian artist duo Karoline Hjorth and Riitta Ikonen. Initially conceived as a play on characters from Nordic folklore, the project has grown to over 150 portraits created in 17 countries across five continents. The duo works through complementing skills in photography, wearable sculpture and text, with a core mission to highlight dialogue about radical system change on interspecies relations. The selection of works at the Marion Art Gallery includes several never before seen works photographed at the Telluride Mushroom Festival in Colorado in August 2024, along with images from Austria, Tasmania, South Korea, Faroe Islands, Iceland, Senegal, Germany, Finland, and Norway.

Hjorth and Ikonen photograph their collaborators, often individuals actively involved or impacted by effects of this era of mass extinction—farmers, surfers, grandmas, citizen scientists, rewinding experts, wild boar hunters, mycologists, philosophers, etc.—outdoors, camouflaged in organic materials sourced from their surroundings. Each portrait is a dialogue between the collaborator and their living environment, capturing the individual’s belonging to the so-called “nature” and questioning the boundaries between beings.

For the artists, the final portrait is the bonus to the encounter with the protagonists in the images. The core of *Eyes as Big as Plates* is always about the meetings. Each portrait starts with a conversation, which is steered by the collaborator. The duo’s main job is to listen. From the conversation, the location and material for the sculpture arrives as a joint idea, resulting in a final portrait and text that are equally important.

One of the biggest reasons the artists choose to work with an analogue camera is what happens with their collaborators in front of the Mamiya 67. It is heavy and bulky, it is a studio camera, not even meant to be used outside; it takes time to set



it up, and the person in front of the camera just has to wait. The actual shooting takes time, and that slows things down and makes it a very different experience to working with a digital camera. Each shoot is a unique chance to be present, take time, and let the weather, mosquitoes and chit chat happen.

*Eyes as Big as Plates* has become a long-term exploration of relations across beings, with its images exhibited, published, and collected by art institutions worldwide, including the Barbican Centre in London, the Norwegian Museum of Photography, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki.

The project's focus has pivoted increasingly towards working with the "indoor society" and since 2015, the duo has collaborated with various educational and youth-focused organizations and schools, including schools in Finland under a partnership with the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

The first book in the series was nominated "Best First Photobook" at the Paris Photo/ Aperture Photobook Awards. The second book is available directly from the project's website and the third book will be published in 2027. *Eyes as Big as Plate's* combination of photography, anthropology, activism, and education continues to challenge conventional narratives on how humans relate to their surroundings across diverse cultures and landscapes, and calls for a collective and synchronized environmental stewardship.

—Karoline Hjorth and Riitta Ikonen  
[www.eyesasbigasplates.com](http://www.eyesasbigasplates.com)







*Anne-Margit (Norway 2023)*







# The Defiance of Inhabiting a Place

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A figure stands with its back to the viewer, clothed in the colors of the landscape, face obscured by a wooly black hat. Behind them is an incline of volcanic tephra covered by moss and lichen, sloping up to a ridgeline dusted with snow. Emerging from their back is a construction fashioned from the dried fibrous stalks and firework heads of angelica that stretch over their shoulders and away from the viewer. The line between the figure and the ground—Svana and the landscape of Iceland—is completely blurred. We are witnessing a human entirely situated in place.

This image drew me to Karoline Hjorth and Riitta Ikonen's collaborative project, *Eyes as Big as Plates*. During my own place-based research, I have repeatedly wandered through the countryside and small towns of rural Iceland to understand the landscape and the people who live within it. This one image eloquently and succinctly depicts the ties between that unique land and those ingenious and “independent people.”<sup>1</sup>

The image of Svana reminded me of a story an older Icelandic friend told. The settlers of Iceland needed to adapt to the brutal environment and climate of that land, so they developed turf houses that emerged from the rolling hills and partially sunk into the ground. Sometimes families would build in two stories—animals kept below with the living space above to take advantage of the thermal mass of livestock to heat the upper compartment. These spaces were dark and could be damp, but they kept out the relentless Icelandic wind and withstood the brutal storms that would wrack the landscape. It wasn't until the middle of the twentieth century that the country modernized, and residents began to build free-standing Western-style houses away from the major cities or ports. The

<sup>1</sup> To quote the translated title of Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness's seminal work, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, which is foundational to the Icelandic national identity.



new homes had all the conveniences and were bright and sunny, except...during their first winter, the owners found their new homes drafty and cold.

“...the reality that human life is connected to and dependent on other species and the land” is a concept known as relational validity, according to Indigenous scholar Eve Tuck and environmental educator and theorist Marcia McKenzie (“Relational Validity”). This dependence comes to mind in an interview with Karoline Hjorth and Riitta Ikonen, where the latter states:

*It really would be helpful to just eliminate the word nature, because by definition it can separate us from nature; creating an illusion that we have humans over here, and then nature somewhere over there. Sparking some questioning of these hard line boundaries, maybe also national boundaries, or age boundaries, or gender boundaries, could diversify the climate crisis conversation in an uplifting way. Ideally the images in the Eyes as Big as Plates series lure the viewer in with uncertainties and offer space, space for questions and dialogue: Who, when, how, why-on-earth etc. Taking a little detour from routine linear thinking by entertaining a thought: Today I am definitely 100% human and also probably 50% granite and 50% moss. This might be closer to truthiness and offer some relaxation from trying to fit in.*

In the centuries since the Enlightenment, a line has been drawn between the individual or humanity and nature, and members of Westernized societies have come adrift from place. Where there was a connection and adaptation to the realities of the local—the ebb and flow of the seasons, the distinct flora and fauna, the quirks of geology and geography—there was now a belief that any place could be remade through ingenuity and hard work. Agriculture and forestry became statistically analyzed and optimized into quantitative sciences of production rather than situated dialogues between the farmer or forester, and the land and its citizens.

During the twentieth century, phenomenological philosophers<sup>2</sup> began to recognize that “being” took place in time and space and ignoring that reality left the individual unmoored, their sense of self incomplete. Towards the end of the twentieth

### Brit (Norway 2018)



century, geographers, anthropologists, and ethnographers<sup>3</sup> became more explicit in connecting the individual to their environment, arguing that one cannot be understood without the other. They began to differentiate a space—an area that may be inhabited devoid of meaning, connection, or memory—from places—locations understood, shaped by, and imbued with significance by inhabitants. The consequence, according to geographer Tim Cresswell, is “To think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures.” Thus, returning to the image of Svana, the inseparability of her form and her environment becomes a statement of her connection to place. A physical blurring that speaks to the interrelated nature of her identity and self and the landscape she inhabits.

<sup>2</sup> Noted phenomenologists include Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>3</sup> Such academics and writers include Wendell Berry, Tim Cresswell, Dolores Hayden, Tim Ingold, Lucy Lippard, Robert Macfarlane, Jeff Malpas, Yi-Fu Tuan, and the aforementioned Eve Tuck.







While Svana's face is obscured, Brit calmly returns the viewer's gaze. She sits on—is part of—the Norwegian shoreline. A tranquil, dark expanse of water and a rocky outcrop recede in the distance. In the foreground, Brit's feet rest in a tidal pool, and she is covered in a mass of grey mud the color of her hair and wrinkled waders and rubber boots the same black texture as the surrounding stones and boulders. Bright green cushions of moss perch on the rock above her shoulder while golden-yellow-orange-green seaweed drapes itself over all the surfaces exposed by the tide's ebb.

In other images in the series, eyes are framed by deep wrinkles, cheeks creased by laugh lines, lenses of glasses are as thick as bottles, hands and knuckles knarled by life emerge from rocks and trees, heads are be-crowned by tufts of grass or masses of leaves. These not only depict the individuals' connection to place but also rejoice in the time it took to gain the experience necessary for such a connection. Age is celebrated in these images as human beings inhabit their landscape, manifesting their experience of the natural world as seeped in knowledge, understanding, and memory.

Another idea has emerged in contrast to the holistic and interactional definition of place: "the extinction of experience". As Westernized societies increasingly insulate themselves from the irregularities and unpredictability of the natural world through technology and infrastructure, their citizens are becoming disconnected from nature (Soga and Gaston). This has negative consequences on the physical and emotional health of the individual and the collective health of the environment. The images of *Eyes as Big as Plates* depict subjects definitely taking a stand against the extinction of their experience. Many look directly at the viewer as if daring them to pass judgment or to offer to help them back into the safe confines of their nursing homes or within the guardrails of "modern" society. They are showing us—confronting us—with another way of being that has rejected the homogenization of technology and global trade. They are very much themselves, connected to their home/land, and immersed in its life. The borders between their humanity and nature's botanical and geological contours are entirely obscured. Their

beings are intertwined with the plants and animals and soil and rocks and mud and water and fog and snow and sunlight and shadow and all that defines their situatedness to place. They propose another way of being that celebrates the human as part of the natural world. We can either accept their invitation or let these images stand as monuments to experience's extinction.

—Dr. Margaret Urban

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*In 2024 Margaret (Megan) Urban received a PhD in Transition Design from Carnegie Mellon University. Her dissertation, titled "A Field Guide to the Anthro-Silvan Interface," is an interdisciplinary examination of the reciprocal relationship between humanity and trees and how it may be used as a leverage point for behavior change in industrialized societies and to foster reconnection to the natural world. Urban is also an award-winning designer and an Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Arts and New Media at the State University of New York at Fredonia teaching graphic design and design history since 2008. She is the co-founder of the interdisciplinary, international project Designers & Forests, which links together designers, scientists, activists, artisans, and community members.*

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left: *Jan (Norway 2017)*  
right: *Britt (Colorado 2024)*

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# Many Ways to Be a Fungus, and Fungal

Our natural animal selves are often drawn to apparent grandiosity manifested through the eye-catching nature of others such as the tallest trees, the most colourful flowers, the brightest insects, the biggest and loudest animals. However, a being's role in nature and the grandiosity of its assistance to others is not reflected through these parameters. Fungi are a powerful example of this.

There are many ways to be fungi, and one of the most abundant is the mycelium forming kind. Some of these, in turn, form essential associations with living plants and actually allow for their life to be led.

It is in these silent, unseen networks that real magic happens; lifeforms communicate, collaborate, and thrive in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. Mycelium, with its intricate interfaces of connections, serves as a reminder that true strength comes not from single organisms, but from the interconnected systems that bind all living things together. In fact, fungi are the organisms that make systems ecosystems.

Fungi, unlike us, live inside their food and are therefore never separate from an “other”, and they depend on their immediate surroundings and their existence constitutes a firmament for life on Earth. These intricate organisms remind us of the forces created through interactions and collaboration, the essential nature of collective action, and the significant transformations that can arise from largely unseen organisms.

*Eyes as Big as Plates* has a remarkable way of making grandiosity through the collaboration of human, minerals, non-human organisms and others. These interactions, however intuitive they may seem to some people when they see the photographs and understand the process behind the pieces,



are novel and powerful and have not been evidenced until this important artwork and project were born.

The pieces and their process attract us to become covered in rocks, fungi, plants, soil. They pull us back to primordial feelings of play, of integration with our natural surroundings and beg us to stay here for a long time listening and feeling. They remind us of the comfort we feel in that state of compenetration with, for example, things we eat. To be inside our food, just like a fungus. The project connects us to the natural world through a profound visual dialogue, blurring the boundaries between humans and the living beings we share the Earth with, until it becomes impossible to distinguish where we end and nature begins.

It's not enough to merely admire the view; we must merge with it, evoking our sense of belonging. We are called to become active participants, to be a part of it all. It feels urgent to dissolve our anthropocentric ideas and instead of seeing ourselves as separate from nature, recognizing ourselves within it. What is Nature? *US*.

Through collective action, interdisciplinary exploration, and a commitment to protect all forms of life, we can contribute to a future where all species can naturally interact. Like fungi, we are shaping this planet, and by working together, we can change the present course.

In writing this, I hope to inspire not only a deeper connection to fungi but also a realization of the power that art, science, and activism hold when intertwined. Let's embrace this integration, amplify the silent voices, and take concrete steps toward a world where biodiversity is cherished, protected, and allowed to flourish, and most importantly played with!

—Giuliana M. Furci

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*Giuliana Furci is a field mycologist, fungal activist, author and executive director of the Fungi Foundation. She is a Harvard University Associate, a National Geographic Explorer, co-chair of the IUCN SSC Fungal Conservation Committee, Fellow of the International Mycological Association, Dame of the Order of the Star of Italy, and author of works including a series of field guides to Chilean fungi. She has also co-authored publications that have redefined our relationship with fungi such as the paper that delimited the term “funga” and introduced the “3F Proposal”, which sparked a global movement.*



*Ragnhild (Norway 2022)*





left: *Arne Johan* (Norway 2023)  
right: *Merete* (Norway 2022)







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left: Scotty (Tasmania 2019)  
right: Jann I (Norway 2022)

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“That’s the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count.”

—*The Overstory*  
by Richard Powers