

Plants_Intelligence

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Sabian Baumann, Ursula Damm, Kyriaki Goni, Ingela Ihrman,
Jochen Lempert (invited by Christiane Meyer-Stoll),
Julia Mensch, Una Szeemann, Zheng Bo

11.7.–23.11.2025

Press briefing: Wednesday, 9 July 2025, 11 am

Opening: Thursday, 10 July 2025, 7 pm

Press Release

Plants_Intelligence, on view in the atrium at the Kunstverein, extends Ștefan Bertalan's radical appreciation of plants and his scientific and artistic search for cross-species interrelationships. How do contemporary artists address our dependence upon, relatedness to and affection for plant life? Where are the interfaces situated? How do they comprehend vegetal agency and intelligence, and how are they shaping it artistically?

Using a variety of artistic methods, all of the invited artists conceive of plants as having agency, perceiving them as companions that are biologically related to human beings. Having evolved in tandem for millennia (if not millions of years), the relationship between humans and plants is both ancient and intimate (even certain genes and neurotransmitters are similar). In the eyes of the dominant culture, all of this is of little consequence: overlooked for the most part, plant life is expected to supply us with foodstuffs, fabrics, fuel, or decorative objects – otherwise remaining inconspicuous. Yet plants are intelligent beings: they have desires and intentions, they communicate and act, are adaptable, capable of solving problems. Embedded in a specific location, they continuously scan their surroundings. Although incapable of fleeing when a situation becomes suboptimal, they do modify their forms to accommodate changing circumstances. In short, they strive to flourish, and deploy a variety of creative resources in the process. They are designers. But also liminal beings, energy converters, transformers: fully earthbound, they simultaneously ascend into the ether, transforming volatile substances into nourishment.

The artists assembled in the exhibition share a passion for plants and their strategies, and situate them in an overarching context. Which is the main objective of this project: by demonstrating that plants are active and intelligent shapers of their modes of existence, we advocate recognition of another, more-than-human way of being. The presentation shows how art plays an important role in this process: already the regular and precise observation and translation of certain plants and their environments via drawing, video, painting, sculpture and other media is capable of heightening our ecological sensibilities and the importance of the highlighted species. The selected works revolve around possible interfaces with Ștefan Bertalan and potentially shared emphases and methods, for example physical immersion paired with scientific observation (of amaranth: Julia Mensch), computational experimentation with (propagation) patterns (of lichen: Ursula Damm), the queering of categorical hierarchies (Sabian Baumann), the psychological-spiritual transformation of material-atmospheric bodies (Una Szeemann) as well as the ways in which vegetal bodies shape space (in direct reference to a drawing by Ștefan Bertalan: Jochen Lempert).

Beyond this, *Plants_Intelligence* also seeks to reclaim central aspects of life that have been expropriated by Neoliberalism, among them, attentiveness, growth, flexibility, intelligence or learning, and to render them tangible as fundamental aspects of relational existence. These multi-layered questions are posed both in the exhibition itself as well as in an events program with invited guests.

From a contemporary perspective, Ștefan Bertalan's open-ended, trans-medial approach to plant life – or more specifically: with the specific mode of being of plants – is interpretable as an artistic intervention into debates concerning the intelligence of 'nature' – specifically of plant life. His observational, re-creative, investigatory, experimental approach, which involves surrendering himself to the plants he studied, assimilating himself to them, remains groundbreaking and relevant today: in the exhibition, it is pursued and developed further, and performed in a variety of different ways. Found alongside mathematical-computational approaches which, while they cannot understand plant forms, at least attempt to do so, are attempts to relate to them directly, to become connected or allied with them. Beyond approaching plants through observation, calculation, and recreation, Bertalan too sought to enter into a kind of resonance with them, a process of exchange, to comprehend plant life in a spiritual sense: through an act of social isolation and personal radicalisation, ultimately, to become a plant himself and remain alive through the inclusion of our companions.

Curated by Yvonne Volkart and Anja Casser

The exhibition and program events resulted from a collaboration between the Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe and the research project *Plants_Intelligence: Learning Like a Plant* (2021-2025) by Yvonne Volkart, Felipe Castelblanco, Julia Mensch and Rasa Smite. Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and hosted by the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.

To the digital press release
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