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Zheng Bo
Phoenix, 2024
Video, 14 min
Commissioned by the Lahore Biennale

The video *Phoenix* is a dance, a ritual, a celebration. It honours the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*), its growth, its fruits, its flourishing. And it honours the way in which people and birds enter into relationships with it, harvesting its fruits, expressing gratitude. For this video, Zheng Bo work together with farmers who live and work on a plantation outside of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The workers come from Pakistan, and are migrants, perhaps even climate refugees, who have become ensnared in exploitive conditions, and in extractivist activities. In the hot sun of *Phoenix*, everything becomes dance: the drums are beaten, the leaves rustle, the bodies move swiftly and skilfully, the camera turns. That is the intelligence of the palm tree: it stretches itself upward, and, together with the farmers, becomes something different, something new, it takes on an open form.

Programm

Curator's Tour
Wed, 17.9., 6 pm

Guided Tours
Sat, 2.8., from 6 pm (Karlsruher Museumsnacht)
Wed, 15.10., 6 pm
Wed, 12.11., 6 pm

Badischer Kunstverein is supported by



In cooperation with
n|w University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland
Basel Academy of Art and Design

The research project is supported by



The Badischer Kunstverein is located in a historic building from 1900 under monument protection and the exhibitions are only partially accessible. Exhibitions in the Atrium are accessible with no step barrier. A gender-inclusive washroom with step barriers is located on the second mezzanine floor of our building.

Our wish is to ensure that visitors have access without barriers as far as possible, and we are interested in improving and re-evaluating our structure. For further information and your suggestions regarding the accessibility at the Kunstverein, please contact us at info@badischer-kunstverein.de or +49 (0)721 28226.

Plants_Intelligence

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

Plants_Intelligence, on view in the atrium at the Kunstverein, extends Stefan 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 Stefan 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 Stefan 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, Stefan 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,

Opening
Thu, 10.7.2025, 7 pm

5 pm
Preview
Plant Talks
Guided tour and conversation with the curators, artists and guests

6 pm
Botanical Bites
a buffet based on the plant repertoire of Stefan Bertalan by Sarai Rose Duke

Bar with DJ Angeles from 9 pm

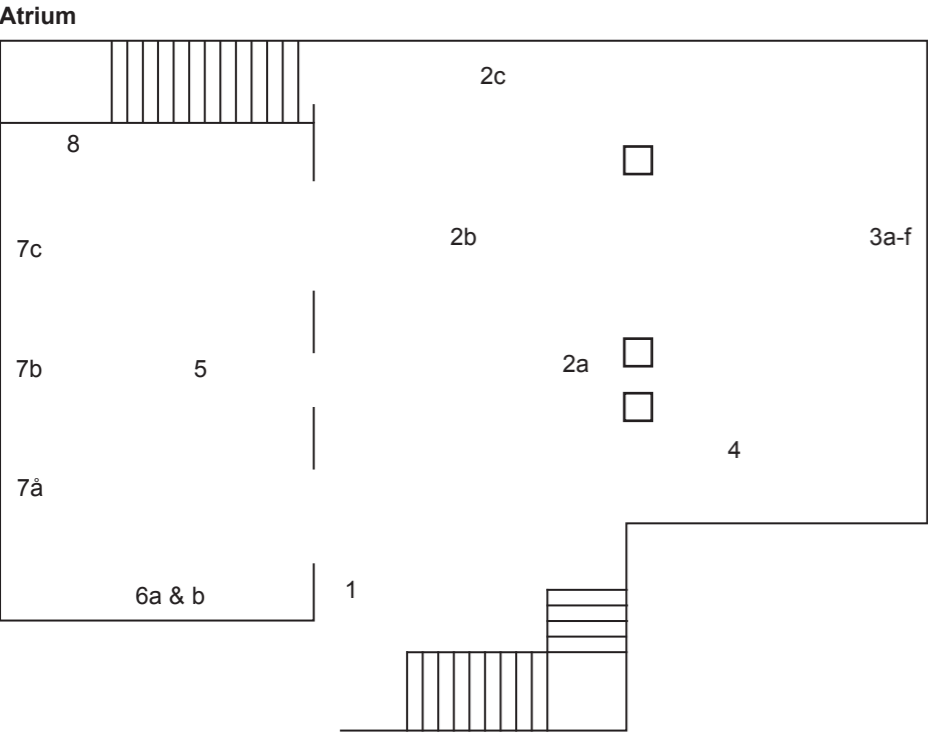
Further information on the *Plant Talks* series on our website.

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.

11.7.–23.11.2025



Atrium

1
Kyriaki Goni
The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden), 2022
Video, 10:42 min
Courtesy: the artist
Commissioned by 8. Gherdeina Biennale

The video begins with a signal emission: a female voice speaks to us humans, her message derived from data that is stored in her DNA with the help of fungi and roots. The voice, which is AI generated, belongs to a hybrid plant, a mixture of the endangered Saxifrage (*Saxifraga depressa*), whose habitat in the Dolomites is found at an elevation of more than 2.000 meters, and a fossil that died out millions of years ago. The plant hybrid then takes us through the history of the Earth, also informing us about the special characteristics of its own species, which most people do not recognize, and which they destroy. A possible source of hope can be found in the Data Gardens, a community of plants that have formed alliances with humans, storing their data there.

The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden) is the second chapter of Kyriaki Goni’s two-part series *Data Gardens*. The work uses a variety of media (including AI, computer animation, augmented reality, drawing, sculpture, video interviews, sound insulation, etc.) to speculate on intelligent plant communities and their capacity to archive data.

2a
Una Szeemann
Le Benandanti – Diana, Rossa, Anna, Lucina, 2022
Bronze, silver patination
each 8 × 8 × 8 cm

2b
Una Szeemann
The Birds Said You Move I, II, III, V, VII, 2021–2023
Bronze, silver patination
I: 41 × 31 × 30 cm
II: 52 × 40 × 40 cm
III: 72 × 23,5 × 21,5 cm
V: 50 × 25 × 18 cm
VII: 66 × 48 × 16 cm

2c
Una Szeemann
Incantarsi, 2024
Bronze, silver patination
200 × 20 × 30 cm
160 × 50 × 30 cm
160 × 50 × 30 cm
150 × 80 × 50 cm

2a–c
On loan from the artist

The installation, consisting of three different works, is reminiscent of a gift table, of a ritual of thanksgiving for the plants that generate fruitful life through their processes and cycles. Una Szeemann is interested in the distinctive features of the material world, of “nature”, as well as in phenomena that elude human perception. In this spirit, she conceives and investigates plants and their growth, first as specific modes of formfinding and worldliness, and secondly as media and traces of cosmic-spiritual beings and worlds.

Plants are energy transformers, form-changers, designers. Inherent to them are

the powers through which they guide their own growth, signal danger and communicate their intentions. Witches, magicians and shamans have been aware of this for thousands of years, and have learned to take advantage of these energies through of various methods. In the series *Incantarsi* (the Italian word for “to be enchanted”), Una Szeemann calls attention to these fundamental capacities of plant life. She connects branches from birches, ashes, linden and chestnuts trees with the blossoms of a palm tree, casting them in bronze. The result is a hybrid composite that is equally branch, human figure, spiritual being, magic wand and artefact—forms that bewitch the viewer through their precision and artistry.

3a
Ursula Damm
Apollonian 1, 2, 3
Voronoi / Drei
Von Innen / Drei
Amorph Locker
Stein Flechten Amorph
Lichen Architecture 1, 2, 3
Pigment prints, hand drawing
29,7 cm × 42 cm

3b
Ursula Damm
Schwimmen / Drei
Pigment print, colored pencils on paper, watercolor
25 × 25 cm

3c
Ursula Damm
Stein Flechten
Pigment print, colored pencils on paper
29 × 25 cm

3d
Ursula Damm
Power diagram 1
Colored pencils on paper, Overlay (tracing paper)
29 × 25 cm

3e
Ursula Damm
Photographies of lichen
Pigment print
29,7 cm × 42 cm

3f
Ursula Damm
Lichen culture
Video animation from self-programmed software

3a–f
On loan from the artist

Lichens are neither plants nor fungi, and instead intelligent symbiotic communities formed in by fungi conjunction with algae or cyanobacteria. They are self-sustaining ecosystems—symbionts that perform photosynthesis and are only able to

perpetuate themselves collectively. Lichens are interminably slow, but their function is essential: they are the precursors of plant life, and hence vital producers of oxygen—in particular in concrete covered urban areas. Using both artistic and natural-scientific methods, Voronoi diagrams, for example, Ursula Damm investigates the ways in which lichen colonize spaces, in the process making them liveable. “The drawings are photographs of lichens, for which the lichens are excised and pressed onto drawing paper. On top of them, I draw patterns by hand that trace the growth dynamics of the lichens. I supplement these via atmospheric gestures which represent the way in which I perceive the unassuming ecology of the lichen habitat.” The animations displayed in conjunction with the drawings apply the rules developed through the drawings to generate lichen imagery. In the photos, created by the artist using an electron microscope, we see how the fungi filaments wrap themselves around the green of the algae. Ursula Damm is a partner with the research project *Plants-Intelligence*.

4
Julia Mensch
Field Drawings, 2025
Ink on Paper
each 17 × 24 cm
On loan from the artist and the SNSF research project *Plants_Intelligence*, HGK Basel FHNW

Amaranth is one of the approximately 20 wild plants that defy the tons of pesticides that are regularly poured onto Argentina’s monoculture crop of genetically modified soybeans, and hence introduce biodiversity into the vast fields of green. Yet amaranth has been a part of human culture for centuries: it was cultivated by the indigenous peoples of South America, proscribed as part of the colonization of the continent, and is today assaulted with pesticides. But this plant will simply not be defeated—thanks to its intelligent strategies: its survival is insured by the incredibly large number of seeds and genetic variations it continually produces. In the framework of the research project *Plants_Intelligence*, Julia Mensch investigates the strategies of this trickster through extended field research, interviews with experts, as well as personal gardening practices in urban spaces and graphic observations.

5
Jochen Lempert
Invited by Christiane Meyer-Stoll
Plant Spaces 1 and 2, 2025
silver gelatine print on baryta paper
On loan from the artist

As a participant in the exhibition *Parlament der Pflanzen I* (curated by Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein 2020/21), Jochen Lempert encountered the

drawings of Stefan Bertalan for the first time, and was immediately enthusiastic. On location, he photographed individual sheets and integrated one of them into the work on view here, originally exhibited as part of *Parlament der Pflanzen II* (2023). Already during his studies in biology, Jochen Lempert used the photographic medium for documentary purposes. Concurrently, beginning in 1978, he produced experimental short films with the artist’s group “Schmelzdahin”, using bacteria or chemicals, among other elements, to decompose the filmstrips. Both of these facets are reflected in his works, produced beginning in the 1990s: first, natural-scientific investigations based on observation, secondly, artistic-poetic and experimental forms of perception.

6a
Ingela Ihrman
Love Me, Love Me Not
Drawing, watercolor
15 × 20 cm
On loan from the artist

6b
Ingela Ihrman
One Fig, 2020
Video of the performance
Courtesy: the artist

For a number of years already, Ingela Ihrman has been developing the costumes she wears during her performance, for which she assumes the role of plants, becoming plant life. Each plant prescribes the form and style of the performance: for the passionflower, the audience drinks nectar; the daisies hold one another by the hand; the pinecones wander from north to south, disseminating their seeds, just as they have done for thousands of years. Can one get closer to plants and their mode of being by performing them temporarily? Yes, that is a time-honoured method. And the other works on view in the gallery pursue a similar trans-strategy, albeit using different means and media. What does it mean for a piece of fruit, for its compact roundness, when it is split down the middle? When it violently becomes two? When the red, fleshy interior is exposed to the outside?

7a
Sabian Baumann
Nigella, 2024
173 × 120 × 4 cm (framed)

7b
Sabian Baumann
Du Ich Wir Das Leben, 2025
128 × 82 × 4 cm (framed)

7c
Sabian Baumann
Raupen, 2024
173 × 120 × 4 cm (framed)

7a–c
On loan from the artist
Courtesy: Galerie Mark Müller, Zurich

The pictures of Sabian Baumann take up the transformative, open and relational aspects of vegetal life, carrying them further on the graphic level: everything is interrelated and interdependent in a very specific way; the objects are peculiarly alive. The world he conjures up against a black background using determined, precise strokes is neither simply harmless and sweet nor instead bitter or sardonic: instead, the viewer is confronted with unaccustomed perspectives, tensions are articulated. It remains unclear whether the caterpillars that creep up the stems devour the plants, or are instead nourished by them amicably before pupating – or being devoured themselves. Without effacing differences, affinities and correspondences become evident, for example, between the veins of the plants and human capillaries, or between the alluring, splayed flower stalks of the black cumin (*Nigella*) and the legs and antenna of the pollinating butterflies and moths that visit them. Undoubtedly, all of the beings and artefacts brought together here have specific intentions—although we can neither comprehend nor understand them.

8
Mathilde Rosier
Savage, 2022
Gouache on paper
91 × 105 cm
On loan from the artist

Here is a being that raises or lowers its arms, legs, wings, and leaves, turning or resting. And here is a spiky head; energies flow through the body. The being is a thistle-person, a “savage”, to use a word that can be translated as wild, dangerous, or fearless. Or we might describe this collage differently: here is a plant hybrid that opens itself powerfully and beautifully to the world, dancing into it shadow-like, becoming a world unto itself. Most of us do not tend to think of plants in terms of movement, although plant life is in fact highly mobile. They are instead associated with sedentariness, sluggishness, equanimity. In *Savage*, in contrast, all is pulsation, vibration: everything has been prepared, is ready to burst forth, extend, like seeds or buds, ready to become spiky. And so, like the works by Ingela Ihrman and Sabian Baumann on view in the same gallery, Mathilde Rosier rejects traditional hierarchical separations: people are thistles, figs, and trees, butterflies that dance.