



Zheng Bo, *The Political Life of Plants*, 2021 (film still), courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery | © Zheng Bo

SYMPOSIUM

Agency of Plants

SEPTEMBER 21 2023
10 AM–8 PM

**KUNSTMUSEUM
LIECHTENSTEIN**

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Agency of Plants

WITHIN THE EXHIBITION PARLIAMENT OF PLANTS II

In the current ecological crisis, which is also a social, psychological and political crisis, there is a growing realization that humans must connect and ally with non-human beings in new ways. In particular, plants – those beings long perceived as other, alien, immobile and passive – are gaining new attention. Not only do plants take care of human and non-human animals, traditional agricultural practices and recent botanic research show that plants have a profoundly rich sensorium: they speak, communicate, make decisions, are responsive and adaptive and help shape environmental conditions. In short, plants have agency, they have an ‘extended cognition’ (as plant theorist Michael Marder has noted) and thus can be defined as intelligent and as ‘active’ subjects.

What does this mean exactly? What does it mean that plants ‘have rights’? And what impact does this have in ‘our’ dealings with, or rather in our coexistence with, plants?

The symposium *Agency of Plants* takes up these questions and examines them through various presentations and joint discussions.

In cooperation with the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation and the ETH’s Prints and Drawings Collection, Zurich.

This symposium is organised by Christiane Meyer-Stoll and Yvonne Volkart. It is made possible with a contribution from the H.E.M. Foundation, Vaduz.

PROGRAM

REGISTRATION IS REQUESTED
WWW.KUNSTMUSEUM.LI → CALENDAR

- 10 AM VISIT AND INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION**
with Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Linda Schädler and Yvonne Volkart, Curator and co-curators of the exhibition
- NOON** Lunch
- 1.30 PM** Welcome by the curators Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Linda Schädler and Yvonne Volkart
- 1.45 PM PLANTS IN THE INDIGENOUS AMAZON AND THE LANGUAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS**
Lecture by Patrícia Vieira
Research professor, Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra
- In my talk, I will discuss the understanding of plants in Amazonian Indigenous communities, as teachers and guides that allow humans better to perceive their connection to the multiple entities that inhabit the rainforest. In many Indigenous traditions, plants engage in social relations and are closely connected to humans, some are even considered our ancestors. I then link this view of plants to the emergence of the ‘rights of nature’ in Amazonian countries, including Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia, and examine the ties between Indigenous knowledge and the legal framework of environmental rights.
- 2.15 PM** Q & A

- 2.30 PM FROM FOREST LAW TO FOREST MIND**
Artist’s lecture by Ursula Biemann

Forest Law and *Forest Mind* are two distinct video works, ten years apart, that speak about the cultural dimensions of the forest. Located in Amazonia, the forest is considered not as a purely biological entity but an active biosemiotics assemblage. While *Forest Law* explores the juridical and forensic dimension of the forest in defence of indigenous territories in Ecuador, *Forest Mind* enters the deeper layers of plant-human interaction. The Amazonian forest, with its intelligent master plants, has formed the indigenous communities in distinct ways of relating to the natural world. My talk sheds light on scientific and shamanic perspectives on how the energetic part of plants interact with the human mind co-creating a biocultural dialogue.

- 3 PM** Q & A
- 3.15 PM** Short break
- 3.30 PM INSERT**
by students of the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW

**3.45 PM TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING PLANT REACTIONS:
RESPONSES AND INTERACTIONS**

Lecture by Roosa Laitinen, associate professor in Genomics-based Plant Science, Organismal and Evolutionary Biology Research Program, Faculty of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Helsinki

Plants, unlike animals, cannot move away from unwelcoming environments. It is thus especially important for them to mitigate the negative effects of environmental changes quickly. In my talk, I will give an overview of the different ways plants react to their environments, respond to changes and interact with their surroundings. In concluding, I will give examples of my own research, investigating the potential for variability in plants' adaptability.

4.15 PM Q & A**4.30 PM SENSING A DAMAGED FOREST**

Presentation by Yvonne Volkart of her publication *Technologies of Care: From Sensing Technologies to an Aesthetics of Attention*

4.45 PM Coffee break**5.15 PM MALEZAS | WEEDS | UNKRÄUTER. AMARANTH AS
POLITICAL AGENT IN COLONIZED AMERICA**

Lecture performance by Julia Mensch

In the frame of the implementation of transgenic agriculture in Argentina since 1996, amaranth was the first wild plant to develop resistance to agrochemicals, growing in genetically modified fields. Named kiwicha, yuyo colorado or amaranth, it is a plant native to the Americas: its seeds were preserved by indigenous peoples, despite the Spanish colonizers' prohibition, and today it is the most wide-spread glyphosate-resistant weed. Currently, it covers over 25 million hectares. Perhaps it is, as the scientist and environmental activist Andrés Carrasco called it, America's revenge.

5.45 PM Q & A**6 PM INSERT**

by the students of the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW

6.15 PM CONCEPTS OF NATURE AND ETHICS

Lecture by Nadia Mazouz, professor of practical philosophy at the ETH, Zurich

The ethics of nature more generally as well as of non-human animals and plants depends on how they are conceptualized. It also depends on the ethical approach chosen. Different versions of an anthropocentric, biocentric or holistic perspectives on nature and non-human living-beings in particular lead to very different evaluations and recommendations. This presentation will provide a systematic overview of ethical approaches depending on such a conceptualization.

6.45 PM Q & A**7 PM PLANT WITNESSING AND LISTENING TO PLANT
ECHOES**

Artist's lecture by Uriel Orlow

Plants do not simply form an inert, passive backdrop against which historical events take place; rather, they are active participants in history and politics. How do we engage with their more-than-human witnessing, how do we listen to plants' 'echoes' from past and present? I will present some of my recent work which engages with plants as witnesses and asks what restitution to nature might mean.

7.30 PM Q & A**7.45 PM** End of the symposium with Aperol

See you there.

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SPEAKER

Ursula Biemann is a Swiss artist and theorist, whose practice centres on fieldwork, often in Indigenous territories, and the creation of networks between different fields of knowledge. Her work reflects on diverse forms of environmental degradation and its related historical and contemporary forces, creating through her videos, books and installations critical perspectives on the dynamics of extractivism and also proposing alternative eco-centric and knowledge-based modes of engagement with the world. Her latest field research took her to southern Colombia where she is involved in the co-creation of an indigenous university for biocultural knowledge for which she generates video archives, exhibitions and the online platform deveniruniversidad.org. The newest video work and artist book *Forest Mind* (Spector, 2022) emerge from this collaborative context of bridging western and indigenous knowledge systems. geobodies.org

Roosa Laitinen is a Finnish plant scientist. After working for fifteen years at several Max Planck Institutes in Germany, she is now associate professor at the University of Helsinki. The primary focus of her work is placed on unravelling the mechanisms that govern how plants respond and adapt to ever-changing environmental conditions and investigating their role in evolution. In her research, she uses *Arabidopsis thaliana*, a member of the mustard family which is known as a model organism for plant genetics and molecular biology. This small, fast-growing plant naturally grows in various habitats across the world, making it an ideal subject for understanding adaptive traits.

Nadia Mazouz is professor of practical philosophy at the ETH, Zurich. Studied physics at the Technical University of Berlin; philosophy at the Technical, Free and Humboldt Universities of Berlin and Leipzig University. Doctorate (Dr. rer. nat.) at the Fritz Haber Institute, Max Planck Society and the Free University of Berlin, 1999; doctorate (Dr. phil.) at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Stuttgart, 2003; research assistant at the Universities of Stuttgart, Tübingen, Dortmund and ETH, Zurich; several research visits at the School of Philosophy, Australian National University, Canberra; habilitation in philosophy at the Department of Humanities, Social and Political Sciences, ETH, Zurich, 2016; professor of practical philosophy, University of Marburg, 2017–2021; since 2022 professor for practical philosophy, ETH, Zurich.

Julia Mensch is a visual artist based in Berlin. She studied at the National Art University in Buenos Aires and in Hito Steyerl's class at the UdK, Berlin. Currently she is a PhD candidate at Bauhaus-University, Weimar and part of the research project "Plants_Intelligence. Learning Like a Plant" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and hosted by the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Her work is an intersection of text, drawing, installation, public events, photography, video and lecture performance. Her practice deals with the history of Socialism and Communism, and with environmental socio-political conflicts in Latin America confronting the exploitative conditions of the land and beings since colonization, and throughout neo-colonialism. She has taken part in several international residency programs and exhibitions, including Savvy Contemporary and NGBK (Berlin), Museo Nacional de Grabado (Buenos Aires), Shedhalle (Zürich), Kunsthalle Appenzell, Art Biennial Sesc_Videobrasil (São Paulo), BienalSur (Buenos Aires), among others.

Christiane Meyer-Stoll is chief curator and member of the executive board at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein. She curated the exhibition *Parliament of Plants I 2020* and *Parliament of Plants II 2023* in collaboration with co-curators.

Uriel Orlow is a visual artist and educator. Orlow's work has been presented at numerous international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2011), *Manifesta 9* (2012, Genk, Belgium) and *Manifesta 12* (2018, Palermo), and biennials in Berlin, Dakar, Kochi, Taipei, Sharjah, Moscow, Kathmandu and Guatemala City. Solo exhibitions include Castello di Rivoli, Kunsthalle St Gallen, Kunsthalle Mainz and State of Concept Athens. In 2023 he received the Prix Meret Oppenheim / Swiss Grand Prix of Art. Monographic publications include *Conversing with Leaves* (Archive Books, 2020), *Soil Affinities* (Shelter Press, 2019) and *Theatrum Botanicum* (Sternberg Press, 2018). He teaches at ZHdK, University of the Arts, Zurich, University of Westminster, London and Maumaus ISP, Lisbon.

Linda Schädler is head of the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zürich (ETH's Collection of Prints and Drawings) since 2016. She has curated several exhibitions with an interdisciplinary approach, as for example, *Irene Kopelman. On Glaciers and Avalanches. In Search of Glaciological Traces* (2018) and *Lara Almarcegui. Deep Inside – Out* (2019). Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow for the Chair of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Zurich and for the Chair of the History of Art and Architecture at the ETH Zurich. Before her dissertation *James Coleman and the Anamorphosis. The View from the Side* was published in 2013, she worked at the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Kunsthaus Zürich. She is the curator of the exhibition *The Politics of Plants*, insert in the exhibition *Parliament of Plants II*.

Patrícia Vieira is research professor at the Centre for Social Studies (CES) of the University of Coimbra in Portugal. Her fields of expertise are Latin American and Iberian literature and cinema, utopian studies and the environmental humanities. Her most recent book is *States of Grace: Utopia in Brazilian Culture* (SUNY UP, 2018) and her most recent co-edited book is *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (Synergetic, 2021). She is the recipient of a European Research Council Consolidator Grant to work on a project titled *ECO – Animals and Plants in Cultural Productions about the Amazon River Basin*. For more information: eco.ces.uc.pt and www.patriciavieira.net

Yvonne Volkart is head of research and lecturer of art theory and cultural media studies at the Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. She also holds a teaching position at Zurich University of the Arts and works as freelance curator and art critic. From 2022-25 she directs the SNSF-research project *Plants_Intelligence. Learning like a Plant*. This fall, her monograph *Technologies of Care. From Sensing Technologies to an Aesthetics of Attention* will be published by Diaphanes, Zurich.

Many thanks to **Roman Kurzmeyer**, Senior Lecturer at Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, for preparing the participation of the students.