Plant Intelligence (Basel, 31 Oct-2 Nov 25)

Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, Oct 31–Nov 2, 2025
Registration deadline: Oct 27, 2025

Yvonne Volkart, Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst FHNW, Basel

The SNSF-research project Plants_Intelligence. Learning Like a Plant (2022-25) is coming to an end. In the framework of an international symposium, it brings together the artistic team (Yvonne Volkart, Felipe Castelblanco, Julia Mensch, and Rasa Smite) with leading theorists, scientists, artists, curators and activists to discuss its findings with the audience. Theoretical, artistic, and experimental formats open up the discourse on plant intelligence and show how plants can be approached aesthetically and politically as intentional and cognizing beings.

Symposium language: English
Free Admission
Deadline of Registration: October 27: https://forms.gle/aLomhg4kxUr8HehPA

Against the backdrop of the current wasting of the world, we must think of other ways—vegetal ways—of worlding: ways that do not consume the world, but re/produce it. Co-Composing it with plants, we might learn to learn like them. Also, in the arts.

The team Plants_Intelligence approached this task by building on the speculative interdisciplinary discourse of plant intelligence. This discourse has been held since around 15 years at the fringes of botany, neurosciences, philosophy, and art. It is challenging and mindblowing, because scientific research can now prove what has been known to alternative plant knowledge for a long time, namely, that plants have capacities; that they behave and learn, cognize and process, produce and shape. We conceive plants as assemblages of physical and chemical materialities, of forces and efficacies that generate life far beyond human scale. They are actors in ecological concatenations and relational events. As such, they are situational, and responsive. They distinguish themselves from animal modes of making worlds, while also being affiliated with them and with us. Together, and including different perspectives and approaches, we discuss what the recognition of the intelligence of plants implies for artistic questions and the formulation of an aesthetics and politics of the vegetal that tries to overcome our culture of wasting the world.

Day 1: Oct 31
HGK Basel, Aula D1.04

13:00-14:30 Part I: Concepts of Plant Intelligence
This block of the symposium introduces the interdisciplinary discourse of plant intelligence in the framework of general definitions, and concepts of intelligence. Stating that plants behave creatively, flexibly, and physically, it asks what an aesthetics of vegetal intelligence must take into consideration.

13.10-13.30 Intro by Yvonne Volkart: What is Plant Intelligence?
13.30-14.30 Keynote by Birgit Schneider: Anthropomorphism in a Feedback Loop. On Speaking with Plants and Machines
14.30-15.00 Coffee break

15:00-18:00 Part II Ingesting-digesting: Intelligence Within
This block draws attention to fundamental modes of interaction between plants and humans via ingestion (as scent, nourishment, intoxication, etc), whereby the notion of intelligence helps to sustain life-enabling relations along metabolic cycles, mutualistic and symbiotic patterns. This block opens up an experiential and even speculative realm, where nuanced modes of plant and human alliances come to the fore.

15:00 Intro by Felipe Castelblanco
15:15 Rodrigo Cámara-Leret: The Healing Forest Sensed by Indigenous People
15:45 Keynote by Jeremy Narby: Learning from Teacher Plants
16:15 Discussion with Jeremy Narby and Rodrigo Cámara-Leret, moderated by Felipe Castelblanco
16.45 Short Break
17.00 Input by Marcos Filardi: Museo del Hambre (Online), introduced by Julia Mensch
17.10 Ayënan Quinchoa and Heraldo Vallejo: The Indigenous Pan-Amazon Perspective (Online), introduced by Felipe Castelblanco
17.30 Screening: Ayënan Quinchoa Juajibioy
17.45 Break

18:00-21:00 Part III: Plant Companions
18.00 Lecture Performance by Julia Mensch: Kiwicha
19:00 Curated Dinner and Performative Input by KOMA Culture Studio: RE-ROOTED

Day 2: Nov 1
HGK Basel, Aula D1.04

9:30–12:30 Part I: Aesthetics and Politics of Plant Intelligence
Examining the behavior of plants, respecting them as living beings, and welcoming them as allies—whether by art, science or vernacular practices—is political: it‘s about opening up to other ways of being. Whereas the morning slot informs about both vegetal and aesthetic strategies of overcoming challenging situations, so is the afternoon block fully dedicated to the artistic research of the team Plants_Intelligence and their partners.

9.30–10.00 Arrival and Coffee
10:00–10:10 Intro to Day 2 by Yvonne Volkart
10:10–11:00 Florianne Koechlin: Plant whispers: How Plants Communicate and Network
11:00–11:15 Coffee Break
11:15–12:15 Keynote by Giovanni Aloi: The Lawn Condition: Thinking with plants and soil
12.30–13.30 Lunch Break

13:30–16:00 Part II: Plants_Intelligence Artistic Research

13:30–13:50 Intro by Yvonne Volkart
13:50–14:20 Julia Mensch: Amaranth as Political Agent
14:20–14:30 Katja Tielbörger: Decision-making in Plants–An Experimental Approach
14:30–15:00 Rasa Smite: Light Sensing. Flower as Antenna and Attractor
15:00–15:30 Felipe Castelblanco: Plant Movement(s)
15:30–15:50 Kathrin Meyer: Among Plants: Intelligence and Subjectivity of Plants as Starting Points for Changing Relations?
15:50–16:00 Yvonne Volkart: Closing remarks
16:00 Coffee Break / Screening by Ursula Damm

16:30–20:00 Part III

16.30–17:00 Valentina Vetturi: Mimosa Pudica. Act #1: On Observation. Participatory plant observing at Freilager-Platz.
17.00–19.00 Guided Tour through Plants_Intelligence exhibition at CIVIC: Julia Mensch and Sofia Viola, Listening Session / VR showcase by Rasa Smite / Videos by Felipe Castelblanco and Plants_Conversations / Relaunch of Insert (online journal) and Unter Pflanzen Magazine
19.00–Harmonization: Synesthetic Ritual with Marilu Pacheco
19.30–Dinner (Soup + Finger food) by KOMA Culture Studio

Day 3: Nov 2
HEK Seminar Room

11:00–13:00 New and Old Cognizing Systems
In this block, we reconsider plants as protagonists and nodes of extended cognizing systems blurring the boundaries of plants, machines, bacteria, fungi etc. We discuss the new distributed intelligent systems effectuated by smart farming as well as the relations of plants and soil.

11:00 Welcome/Wrap up
11:10 Noelia Billi: Plant Intelligence and the Aesthetics of the Artefactual Sensorium (Online)
12:00–13:00 Keynote by Michael Marder. The Soil as the Unconscious: A Thick and Opaque Image of Plant Intelligence
13:00 Closing

Plants_Intelligence. Learning Like a Plant (2022–2025) is realized by Yvonne Volkart, Felipe Castelblan-co, 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
In cooperation with HEK House of Electronic Arts Basel

Reference:
CONF: Plant Intelligence (Basel, 31 Oct-2 Nov 25). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 9, 2025 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/50840>.