

Sensorial Symphonies – Thinking Plants Otherwise Intro

Hello everyone,

My name is Elisabeth Schilling. I'm the choreographer of the dance piece *Sensorial Symphonies*. Thank you so much for joining me in this presentation on our newest creation at the Grand Théâtre in Luxembourg. This project, two years in the making, arose from a deceptively simple question:

What if we could feel the world as plants do?

This question, poetic and philosophical, set in motion a long research process involving scientists, philosophers, sound artists, and movement researchers. I began in the studio with images: the feeling of soil pressing around one's roots or legs, the slow, deliberate stretch toward light, the opening of the body, as if it was blossoming. Yet these images soon revealed their limits, shaped as they were by an anthropocentric and simplistic worldview on the vegetal world.

Hated, loved, ignored, or sacralised, plants have always been part of our lives — and therefore part of our art, folklore, and literature. But the challenge was this: how could I create a choreographic work that comes as close as possible to the nature of plants themselves — without idealising their beauty, reducing their intelligence, or merely imitating their form.

Most of us grew up with the Aristotelian hierarchy: plants at the bottom, then animals, and at the top, humans - the "most intelligent." But what if intelligence isn't just a matter of reasoning? Michael Pollan suggests that if we define intelligence as the ability to solve life's challenges through adaptability, then plants may be among the most intelligent beings on Earth. They have, after all, survived two mass extinctions that wiped out countless animal species.

As estranged from our culture as plants may seem, we have largely forgotten - or taken for granted - that from plants comes our breath, our food, our transportation, our furniture, our books, our shelter, our medicine, and our inspiration. In a culture driven by consumption and utility, plants are often seen merely in terms of how they can "serve us." Just consider the way we refer to the rainforest as "the lungs of the world" - as if its only purpose were to absorb the CO₂ we produce.

Emmanuele Cocchia writes: „*The world is above all what plants have known how to make of it. They are the actual makers of our world, although this making is clearly different from any other activity of the living.*” And it is precisely that “clearly different” mode of being that fascinates me as an artist. Artistic expression opens the door to other forms of thought, sensation, and experience.

Might dance - ephemeral, embodied, sensorial, abstract, and living partly outside our semantic systems - be the ideal art form to encounter the plant world? A world where

meaning is not fixed in words, materials or static identities, but unfolds in movement and in relation?

OVERALL CONCEPT & PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING

One of the key inspirations for *Sensorial Symphonies* was philosopher Michael Marder and his influential book *Plant-Thinking*. In it, he references the Portuguese word *desencontro* - a beautifully untranslatable term that suggests a narrowly missed meeting, a divergence between beings who exist on different wavelengths. It speaks so deeply to the difficulty - and the poetry - of connecting across species, across ways of being, across ways of experiencing the world.

Plants invite us to think, sense, and experience the world otherwise. That invitation lies at the heart of *Sensorial Symphonies*.

"A flower - both one and many" – Michael Marder

As Michael Marder writes, a flower is not a single unit but a constellation of florets, each with a certain independence, yet bound together in relation. Through their modular growth and radical openness to their surroundings, plants unsettle the notion of individuality that feels so self-evident to us: they grow in modules, open and porous, transformed by water, wind, soil, and light. A plant in its being, thus questions innately our idea of a fixed, stable identity. It is always in exchange, transformed by what passes through it, even as it alters its surroundings in turn.

"Plants are beings of radical exteriority. They do not turn inward; they unfold. They do not master their surroundings but grow through and with them." Michael Marder

This notion of exteriority struck me as essential. In our general Western human-centered thinking, the self is internal, private, and bounded. But plant-being is porous, defined by relation, exposure, and transformation.

The being of plants - *their way of being with* - was a guiding inspiration. Plant-being is not defined by individuality, but by relation. Not as isolated entities, but as what some have called a collective being: an assemblage of multiplicities, of coexistence, of conviviality.

Questions such as: What is this *being with*? Is it a being - we? Where does it begin, and where does it end? How far does it stretch, and what does it encompass? Is it possible to imagine a *we* that does not depend on inclusion or exclusion?

In this dynamic spirit — this constant transformation of self and surroundings that Michael Marder describes as *"a rhythmic turning of the changing into the changed"* — reality itself can be understood as a shared space, a commons. It is made up of relationships in which both sides are transformed by their encounter. To truly participate in reality is to enter into this reciprocity — one that is not abstract or distant, but tangible, physical, and embodied, as Andreas Weber reminds us.

Emanuele Coccia offers a parallel image: „Our being in the world is always an immersion, a being in the very sea of the world. Movement, whether of plants or of people, is always an exchange — entering into the world and being entered by it. At its heart lies permeability: the openness to be changed by what surrounds us.“

This idea of permeability — inseparable from a profound sense of interconnectivity — forms the guiding thread of *Sensorial Symphonies*. When viewed in its entirety, the work reveals a vision in which every element exists only through its relationships to the others. These ideas are present not only in the choreography’s intricate web of actions and consequences — the continual interplay and mutual dependence between dancers — but also in the way each artistic component has been interlaced into a living organism.

THE MACRO: THE ELEMENTS OF THE WORK

For the first time in my practice, I approached set design, lighting, and musical composition as active participants in the piece — parts of a forming, changing organism rather than static, supporting layers. Each was conceived as porous, responsive, and open to transformation by the others. Like a natural ecosystem, nothing stands alone; every shift reverberates, every gesture leaves a trace, and every action carries its consequence:

Musically, the work stages its own dialogue between human-made virtuosity and the often-overlooked complexity of vegetal presence.

The choreography unfolds against Sergei Rachmaninov’s iconic *Piano Concerto No. 2* — reimagined and interwoven with a contemporary score by Pascal Schumacher and the organic sounds of *The Plant Philharmonic*. Rachmaninov’s concerto, one of Western culture’s most celebrated romantic works, stands as an emblem of human virtuosity with its sweeping emotional scope and technical brilliance it is a pinnacle of concert tradition.

By contrast, *The Plant Philharmonic* invites us into a sonic world that, to our Western ears, might register as minimalist — yet in truth reveals the intricate communication systems of the plant world. It emerged from a year-long research process into both direct and indirect plant sounds, captured in collaboration with sound artists, bioacoustic laboratories, and scientists from across the globe.

The resulting soundscape is an assemblage of diverse plant voices, recorded through a range of technical methods, and shaped into a polyphony that foregrounds sounds which are continuously present in the natural world yet inaccessible to the frequencies our human ears can detect. In this way, it draws attention to the vast dimension of vegetal life that remains perpetually overlooked by humans — as though it were not there at all.

The intersection of these seemingly opposing forces — the sweeping romanticism of the piano concerto and the subtle, non-human frequencies of *The Plant Philharmonic* — produces a sonic landscape as layered and interdependent as the ecosystems it seeks to evoke. This contrast is deliberate, inviting us to reconsider what virtuosity might mean: the mastery of human artistry set alongside the understated yet intricate expression of plant life.

The marimba — an instrument crafted from wood — serves as a bridge between these two worlds, inherently embodying both nature and culture within a single sound.

The set and costume design's interconnected, weaving structures served both as a poetic metaphor for the entangled nature of our world and — through their colour palette — as an invitation to “think plants otherwise.” Rather than reproducing the familiar greens of the flora in our hemisphere, the designs unfolded in bold shades of black, red, orange, and yellow. These were colours that resist the comfort of recognition, urging the viewer to imagine vegetal life beyond the limits of their habitual associations - to encourage a deeper reflection on plants — to see them not only as they present themselves to us here and now, in Western culture, but within entirely different registers of perception.

We also collaborated with a scent artist, whose contribution became an integral part of the dramaturgy. The aim was to engage as many senses as possible, to construct a world in which perception is multi-layered and indivisible. For when we experience the world sensorially, things are not separate — not as they are when we analyse, dissect, and categorise them in the rational mind.

The title itself, *Sensorial Symphonies*, speaks to this approach. “Sensorial” evokes the immediacy of embodied perception — touch, scent, hearing, sight — while “Symphonies” suggests a complex composition in which many distinct voices coexist, interact, and transform one another. Together, the words propose a way of meaning making that is not linear or singular, but polyphonic, relational, and alive.

In this way, the multisensory nature of the work circles back to the central idea of permeability — to openness, to transformation, to becoming.

THE MICRO: TEXTURES, CHOREOGRAPHIC STRUCTURES

The word *sensorial* draws me immediately to the dance — to the micro scale — because every movement in this work emerged from close collaboration with the dance artists, each responding to a sensory impression arising between dancer and plant. In the early stages of creation, we spent countless hours developing what I call *textures*: sensory impressions — whether visual, auditory, or haptic — translated into the body of the dancer.

A texture is defined less by shape than by sensorial intention — a distinct movement quality rooted in a felt perception. From a vast repertoire of such textures, drawn from a wide range of plant-inspired associations, we began shaping the choreography you see today.

Already in my past works, I explored these movement qualities that I call *textures*. The choreography focused on a collective flow of listening, almost like a living organism. People often told me it reminded them of metamorphosis. Intrigued by this observation, I began to research what the word entailed philosophically.

It was also through the work of Michael Marder that I encountered Goethe's reflections on metamorphosis in relation to the plant world. As Goethe writes: “*Everything is leaf, and*

through this simplicity the greatest diversity is possible.” For Goethe, plants embody metamorphosis most clearly, as their very essence is defined by continual transformation — the living change of form.

Marder recalls this long tradition of describing plants as metamorphosis. Yet he also points out a crucial distinction: plants change continuously — not only through metamorphosis (a shift of form), but through metabolism (a shift through matter and time). Metabolism situates plants within a temporality of process, where transformation is material, embodied, and ongoing.

Plants, therefore, undo the rigid oppositions that have long structured Western thinking: Life / Death, Visible / Invisible, Active / Passive, Self / Other.

As a metabolic process, plants exist in continuous differentiation. They escape form: their life is in becoming, growth, decomposition, budding, and regeneration. Their “form” is not static or fixed, but distributed, temporal, and entangled with the environment. In this sense, plants reveal that life cannot be reduced to appearance. Their light-digestion, their silent decay and bloom, displace visibility itself.

To *remember with the body* is to experience time metabolically — to live change without grasping it, to be shaped through dispersal rather than control. Plant change is not symbolic but material. It is irreversible, interconnected, and non-centralized.

This understanding of metamorphosis and metabolism — of life as continual becoming — shaped both the choreography and the collective thinking behind it. Grounded in our research on textures, the dancers move with a fluidity that echoes the distributed organization of plants, forming patterns of mutuality and reciprocity. Group sequences unfold like living ecosystems — interdependent, dynamic, animated by invisible forces — continuously metamorphosing into a shared becoming. Symbiosis, blossoming, exuberance, but also decay, mortality, and renewal: metabolism balances the *we* in ever-shifting and complex ways.

SPACE & INSTALLATION

Sensorial Symphonies also embraces its contradictions. The theatre is a human-made space — a world of walls, seats, and stage lights — a realm profoundly distant from the environments plants naturally inhabit. Bringing plant-being into this space is never neutral; it carries the weight of a cultural history in which “human” has so often been defined in separation from “nature.”

And yet, this is the space in which we chose to place the work. Perhaps this is precisely where the conversation must unfold — within our cultural and social forums, the very spaces where meaning is shaped, negotiated, and contested. How can we bring plants to the centre of the stage without reducing them to props? How can we encounter them without sacrificing, idealising, or estranging them — but instead meet them in ways that are ethically attentive? How can we create a genuine, shared presence across species within the frame of

performance? How can we invite plants into an environment shaped entirely by human needs and aesthetics, so profoundly unlike the habitats they naturally inhabit? And, within such a space, how can we invite audiences to “think plants otherwise”?

These reflections also inspired the installation we created in the theatre foyer. Within this entirely human-made architecture, visitors step into a space sonically saturated with the inner life of a tree – the resonances of what it sounds like from within its trunk. It creates a gentle yet disorienting paradox: standing inside a human structure while, through sound, inhabiting the intimate interior of a plant.

Here, I turn to Emanuele Coccia, who speaks of “being-in-the-sea-of-the-world” - of movement as immersion and permeability. His words shift our understanding of space from something fixed and bounded to something fluid, shared, and transformative. This became my red thread: permeability not only between the dancers themselves, but also between all elements of the work - movement, music, set, light, space and scent — each open to the others, each altering and being altered in turn.

FINALE

From Michael Marder’s perspective, this described openness resonates with the vegetal modes of *metamorphosis* and *metabolism*. Metamorphosis can be understood as the continual change of form itself. Metabolism, for Marder, goes further: it is change that becomes sensuous, embodied — a becoming that is not abstract, but lived. If metamorphosis marks the individual’s transformation, metabolism gestures towards a “becoming-we” — a state of deindividuation in which self and environment are inseparable.

Marder describes vegetal life as a “plural singularity”: each plant is at once itself and its kin, inseparable from the multiplicity of growths that make up its being. Even a “single specimen” is never singular — it is a web of relations with soil, air, light, and the other beings it touches. This life leads us toward the *we* hidden inside every *I*.

In this sense, “becoming-plant” is not just a metaphor; it is an invitation to inhabit a form of life in which to grow is to alter, and to alter is to relate. Plants do not master their surroundings; they grow through and with them. They are, in Marder’s words, “the becoming of the becoming” — a living form of the alteration of form.

Sensorial Symphonies is not a work *about* plants; it is a work that tries to think, move, and sense *with* them. It is an attempt to stretch the *we* — not as a fixed category, but as an evolving web of reciprocity. Perhaps, if we learned to grow through and with the world, as plants do, our relationships — to each other, to the planet, and to ourselves — might transform. That question, like the work itself, remains alive, porous, and growing.