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Zheng Bo Gets Intimate—and Political—with Plants

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Zheng Bo: *Le Sacre du printemps (Tandvärkstallen)*, 2021–22, 16-minute video.
PHOTO ROBERTO MAROSSÌ

In [Zheng Bo \(https://www.artnews.com/t/zheng-bo/\)](https://www.artnews.com/t/zheng-bo/)'s video *Le Sacre du printemps (Tandvärkstallen)* (2021–22), naked men gyrate passionately against trees in a verdant forest. They writhe and moan in ecstasy. At midpoint, the camera turns upside down as the men drop to the ground; what was frenzy dissipates into serenity as they lie still, their bodies melting onto the mossy floor. Zheng composed this 16-minute dance and film piece, currently on view at the 59th Venice Biennale, in collaboration with five Nordic dancers. With pines between 60 and 600 years old in a forest in Dalarna, Sweden, the dancers perform what the artist calls “an ecosexual courtship.”

Le Sacre is the latest of Zheng's works to explore the natural world as pleasurable and erotic. It's reminiscent of his earlier video series *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing), where in each chapter, different characters engage in a sexual act with pteridophyte (spore-dispersing) plants in a forest in Taiwan. In portraying relations between queer men and ferns—common plants in the subtropical island that are seldom deemed of value—Zheng emphasizes structures of marginalization across species and proposes possibilities of intimacy between them. More graphic than *Le Sacre*, these videos show close-up shots of men, some of them BDSM performers, stroking their penises with ferns, rubbing their nipples against spiky stems, or ejaculating onto tendrils that then drip with semen.

Pteridophilia is meant to be as explicit as pornography, though the artist sees sexuality less as a spectacle and more as a plain fact of the natural world. “Sex is everywhere in nature,” Zheng coolly tells me in a virtual studio visit. “And interspecies sex is not a human invention.” He offers, as example, how some orchids have evolved to visually imitate bees, which then try to copulate with the flowers. At times, the conceptual deliberations of these eco-sex works have been overshadowed by their shock value. When the *Pteridophilia* series was presented in 2020 in Japan, where laws prohibit the display of genitals, Zheng and the curators omitted the scenes, leaving instead black screens that emitted moans. The 2018 screenings at Manifesta in Palermo were met with protests. Zheng doesn't court controversy, though; he's indifferent to it.



Zheng Bo: *Ecosensibility Exercises* 生態感悟練習, 2021.
PHOTO LUCA GIRARDINI

WHEN ZHENG MET ME online, he was in the dark. It was after 9 PM in the artist's home, located in a village on Lantau Island, Hong Kong. Zheng avoids artificial lights after dusk, so as to sync his body with the earth's daily rotation. His doors usually stay open, he tells me, because he doesn't want to close himself off from the outside. (My Zoom window seemed starkly lit in comparison. Not only did my lights stay on late into the night, but I beam them directly into my face.)

Habits like these are part of what Zheng terms “ecosensibility,” a defining outlook for his life and art practice. His commitment to studying the reciprocal relationships between social liberation and ecological stewardship has, over the last two decades, taken the forms of videos, horticultural installations, performances, and pedagogical projects. Born in 1974, Zheng grew up in a small town on the edge of Beijing and spent most summers in his mother’s hometown in Yunnan, a culturally and naturally diverse mountainous province. At City University of Hong Kong, where he is currently a professor in the School of Creative Media, Zheng and select PhD students produce scholarship and art projects as the Wanwu Practice Group, inspired by the over-2000-years-old notion of *wanwu* that translates from Chinese to “ten thousand things,” or “myriad happenings.” In the 2016 article “Contemporary Art and Ecology in East Asia,” Zheng and art historian Sohl Lee outline their perspective on ecosensibility: everything, they argue, arises from an ultimate source (most often called *dao*) that “resists objectification but is immanent in the world.” This outlook doesn’t provide simplified answers, but rather meets complexity with complexity. It “recuperates alternative worldviews of nature without assuming that pre-modern worldviews were coherent and unchanging.”



View of Zheng Bo's 2021 exhibition “Wanwu Council 萬物社” at Gropius Bau, Berlin.
PHOTO LUCA GIRARDINI

ZHENG’S APPROACH TO socially engaged art is informed by East Asian metaphysics, the socialist legacy in China, and Western art history. Completed under the supervision of Douglas Crimp at the University of Rochester, Zheng’s PhD dissertation presents a comprehensive survey of contemporary socially engaged art in China. “Chinese artists and critics often regard this burgeoning field [of socially engaged art] as a new phenomenon, an import from the West,” Zheng writes in “Workers of the World, Unite!”, a 2020 article that evolved from his dissertation. “But its history specifically echoes leftist Chinese culture—an extension of Comintern aesthetics.” Zheng reassesses these histories in installations like *Socialism Good* (2016), where, at the CASS Sculpture

Foundation in the UK, the artist replanted alternanthera plants, arranging them to spell out the show's title in Chinese. The landscaping design mimicked the one implemented by the People's Republic of China on Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1991. Zheng's composition stayed true to the design in Beijing: the plants that filled the letters were dark purple, the background yellow, and a trim of green outlined the entire phrase. Yet unlike the state, which maintained tight control of its display, Zheng relinquished oversight. In the weeks following his piece's debut, spiky weeds sprang up and punctured the clean lines.

“Survival Manuals” (2015–ongoing) likewise responds to this leftist heritage. For this series of drawings, Zheng meticulously hand-copies state nature guides, such as “Shanghai's Wild Edible Plants.” Written by botanists and distributed by the Communist Party in 1961, this guide taught civilians to forage in response to widespread famine during the Great Leap Forward. His act evokes multiple histories of the craft—both the ancient sutra copying and recitation practice of monks, and the practice of clandestinely copying banned books during the Cultural Revolution.

Though recent state-collectivist visions cast an unmistakable shadow on Zheng and his generation, he emphasizes his focus on older socialist histories. He draws inspiration from concepts such as the Great Unity (*Datong*), a Chinese utopian vision of multispecies harmony articulated by late Qing dynasty thinker Kang Youwei and later reinterpreted by the PRC. Zheng believes these philosophies should be recuperated from nationalistic interests, and turns toward natural forms of cooperation. His solo exhibition “Wanwu Council” at the Gropius Bau in Berlin last summer included a single-channel video installation, *The Political Life of Plants* (2021) that featured conversations between the artist and scientists over a black-and-white, fixed angle shot of an ancient beech forest in Brandenburg. In one segment, Zheng and ecologist Mathias Rillig discuss “collaboration, competition, and community-building of life underground.” As mycorrhizal fungi and tree roots developed advanced networks for communication and nutrition-exchange, Rillig says, they both gave up certain biosynthesis abilities, in favor of “evolved dependence.” These prevailing mutualisms, “thought to be 460 million years old,” Rillig continues, offer a beyond-human perspective on notions of agency and governance.



View of Zheng Bo's *Drawing Life* 寫生, 2021, in the exhibition "Wanwu Council 萬物社" at Gropius Bau, Berlin.

PHOTO LUCA GIRARDINI

BEHIND ZHENG'S VILLAGE is a hill where locals forage plants—mainly for medicinal herbs and light sustenance. He often takes long ambles around the island, sometimes to scavenge, sometimes to observe. Over the years he has amassed a collection of plant drawings, which are neat and figurative yet scratchy, drawn with a quick sort of precision. Exactly 366 works from this "Drawing Life," series (2020–ongoing) were installed as part of his Gropius Bau exhibition. Each study captures an intimate connection: one shows a fern that kept the artist company during his quarantine period; another depicts a lychee tree in his village. The drawings are as modest as they are economical: in one year, he went through only three 6B charcoal pencils.

The lovingly rendered "Drawing Life" sketches were laid flat in neat arrangements, covered with glass panes, on long wooden boards that sat low on granite stones. These ankle-high platforms were distributed throughout several rooms, referencing the 24 periods in the traditional East Asian lunisolar calendar. Positioned close to the ground, the drawings summoned visitors to kneel to their level, to genuflect toward them in reverence, as if in prayer. It's a simple gesture, yet one that perfectly evokes Zheng's worldview.