

## ZHENG

# BO

## Intimate Beings

In the many forms of social practice, we seemed to have forgotten to invite our plant friends to take part. Not so for the Chinese-born artist Zheng Bo, who has been including ferns and other greenery in his engagements with urban sprawl, even using plants to foster queer ecosexual relationships between humans and flora. For Bo, love knows no bounds.

*By Harry Burke*



Stills from *Pteridophyllia I*, 2016  
4K video, colour, sound, 17 min.

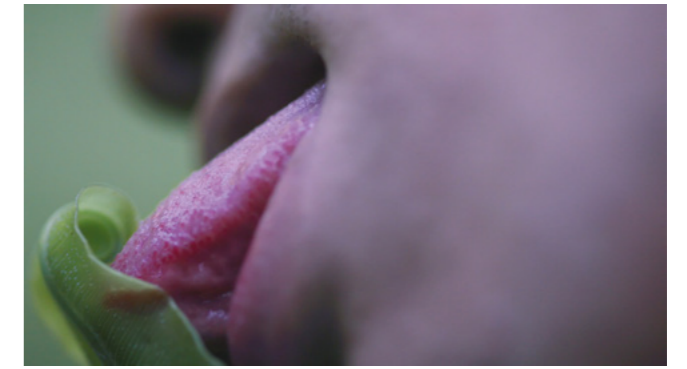
Zheng Bo's forays into plant politics emerged out of his earlier projects with forms of social practice. His commitment to pedagogy led him, in 2016, to create [www.seachina.net](http://www.seachina.net), an anthology and massive open online course that documents and teaches the subject of socially engaged art in contemporary China. This research has given visibility to a discourse that is underrepresented within the region, and to a region that is underrepresented within the discourse. Over the past seven years, Zheng has staged a series of idiosyncratic collaborations with weeds and ferns in order to study issues surrounding the life of plants and investigate the humanist values that underlie contemporary art, sex, and life more broadly.

Zheng's curiosity for plants blossomed when he noticed weeds occupying vacant building sites in the skyrocketing urban landscape of Shanghai's West Bund, which in the past decade has been developed into a muscular cultural hub. Soon

after, he brought his interest in the relationship between stray plants and city planning into the museum. In a 2016 commission for the group exhibition "Mountain Sites: Views of Laoshan" at the Sifang Art Museum in Nanjing, China, the artist cultivated a "weed plot" on the institution's roof. The Sifang Art Museum is known for its snaking, neobrutalist design, a signature of its architect, Steven Holl. The unruly collusions of plant specimens within Zheng's rambunctious, triangular weed patch contrasted with the striking geometries of Holl's facade.

This wasn't the only juxtaposition at play. Luxury villas neighbour the museum, indexing the social inequality of a country in which 1% of the population hold, per some calculations, at least a third of the wealth. Zheng queries the Occupy Wall Street slogan of the 99% by regularly citing the statistic that human beings make up only 0.01% of the earth's biomass. The plants that he worked with in

All images: Courtesy of the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery



Stills from *Pteridophyllia II*, 2018  
4K video, colour, sound, 20 min.

Nanjing were chlorophyllic citizens of the greater 99.99%. By placing plants in the spotlight, the artist, whose commitment to interspecies interdependence leads him, according to the *South China Morning Post*, to travel everywhere with his Yorkshire Terrier, probes the human bias that often infiltrates discussions of political representation.

Reflecting on the idea of the Anthropocene, a term defining "the epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces", the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing noted in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) that "although some interpreters see the name as implying the triumph of humans, the opposite seems more accurate: without planning or intention, humans have made a mess of our planet." Deconstructing the privileged role of humans in the Anthropocene, she contends that this mess is not an outcome of our species biology, but an effect of industrial capitalism.

Since April of this year, as coronavirus lockdowns brought countless people into renewed relationships with their immediate surroundings, Zheng has walked daily to a hill behind his village on Hong Kong's Lantau Island, where he has visited and sketched local plants. His pencil-on-paper drawings, displayed this summer in his solo exhibition "The Soft and Weak Are Companions of Life" at Kunsthal Lissabon, meditate on the potency of plant life, while evoking the Chinese scholar-artist tradition of bird and flower paintings. There is a fluidity to Zheng's drafting, which darts, like a bird in flight, between leaf, twig, and sprig. His field sketches trace constellations and entwinements, unlike, for example, a botanical illustration, which separates and classifies specimens for the purpose of scientific analysis.

Though their geographic contexts vary, these artworks affirm the vulnerability and resilience of life under duress. As scholars such as

Ruth Wilson Gilmore have told us, the global contemporary present is shaped by the forces of structural adjustment and “organised abandonment”. By carefully attending to the marginalised species that prosper in the fallow spaces of capitalist development, Zheng seeks to articulate counterhegemonic lifeways. He presents plants as eloquent storytellers of earthly survival, to borrow Donna Haraway’s powerful turn of phrase.

Last year, two of Zheng’s earlier daily drawing practices, in which he copied pages from historical survival manuals compiling wild edible plants, were shown in the solo exhibition “Dao Is in Weeds” at the Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery, Japan. The show also included *Fern as Method* (2019): forty-two potted ferns on concrete cinderblocks arranged in a grid across the floor.

Next to this conference of ferns was a small wooden box containing pencils and paper on clipboards. Visitors were invited to pause and sketch the plants. The exhibition’s title referenced an anecdote from the Zhuangzi, the c. 3rd century BCE classic of Daoist philosophy. When asked where the Dao is, the philosopher Zhuang Zhou replied: “Dao is ubiquitous, and all embracing.” Pressed to share more, he observed that the Dao is in ants, in weeds and potsherds, and even in excrement and urine. The Dao, the lesson reveals, is truly everywhere, even in the lowest forms of life.

Dao is often translated into English as “the way”, or “way-making”. Daoism traces the harmony of nature. It describes an equilibrium of energy flow within a vast universe that continuously and spontaneously regenerates. Because of this

universe’s immense scale, Daoism attends to the microcosmic details of what can be known of everyday life. Our local context is a portal into the deepest roots of the Dao. While preparing for the exhibition, Zheng visited Kyoto’s Sujin district, a residential area east of the city’s main station that is being redeveloped for a new Kyoto City University campus. Zheng worked with activists, artists, architects, and anthropologists to trace the area’s longstanding inequities, while analysing local plant and water ecologies. The group staged an “EcoFuturesSujin” workshop, and authored a manifesto for a sustainable community landscape grounded in the equality of all species. Their research was presented on low reading tables in “Dao Is in Weeds” in an installation titled *Sujin Study Room* (2019).

“Dao Is in Weeds” struck a balance between Zheng’s spiritual concerns and his interest in community art, where Daoism provided a powerful set of tools for practicing social justice. Daoism’s sensitivity to local environments challenges the chaotic and alienating abstractions of global capitalism. Perhaps more profoundly, it seeks to balance the needs of the self with those of others through guiding principles such as *wuwei* (noncoercive actions), *wuming* (namelessness) and *wuyu* (objectless desires). Zheng’s artwork is driven, or indeed fertilised, by his Daoist readings of ecological crisis.

These frameworks likewise guide the artist’s repeated returns to the medium of drawing. Contemporary art is often conceptualised as a system of viewership – with those of us who look at

Stills from *Pteridophila III*, 2018  
4K video, colour, sound, 15 min.



Stills from *Pteridophila IV*, 2019  
4K video, colour, sound, 16 min.





*Socialism Good*, 2016  
Alternanthera, soil, weeds, 4 x 16 m  
Installation view, CASS Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood, England

# Ferns advocate for a sustainable and plentiful agricultural biodiversity.



Survival Manual II (Hand-Copied 1945 "Taiwan's Wild Edible Plants"), 2016  
Ink on paper, 105 sheets  
18.4 x 13 cm each

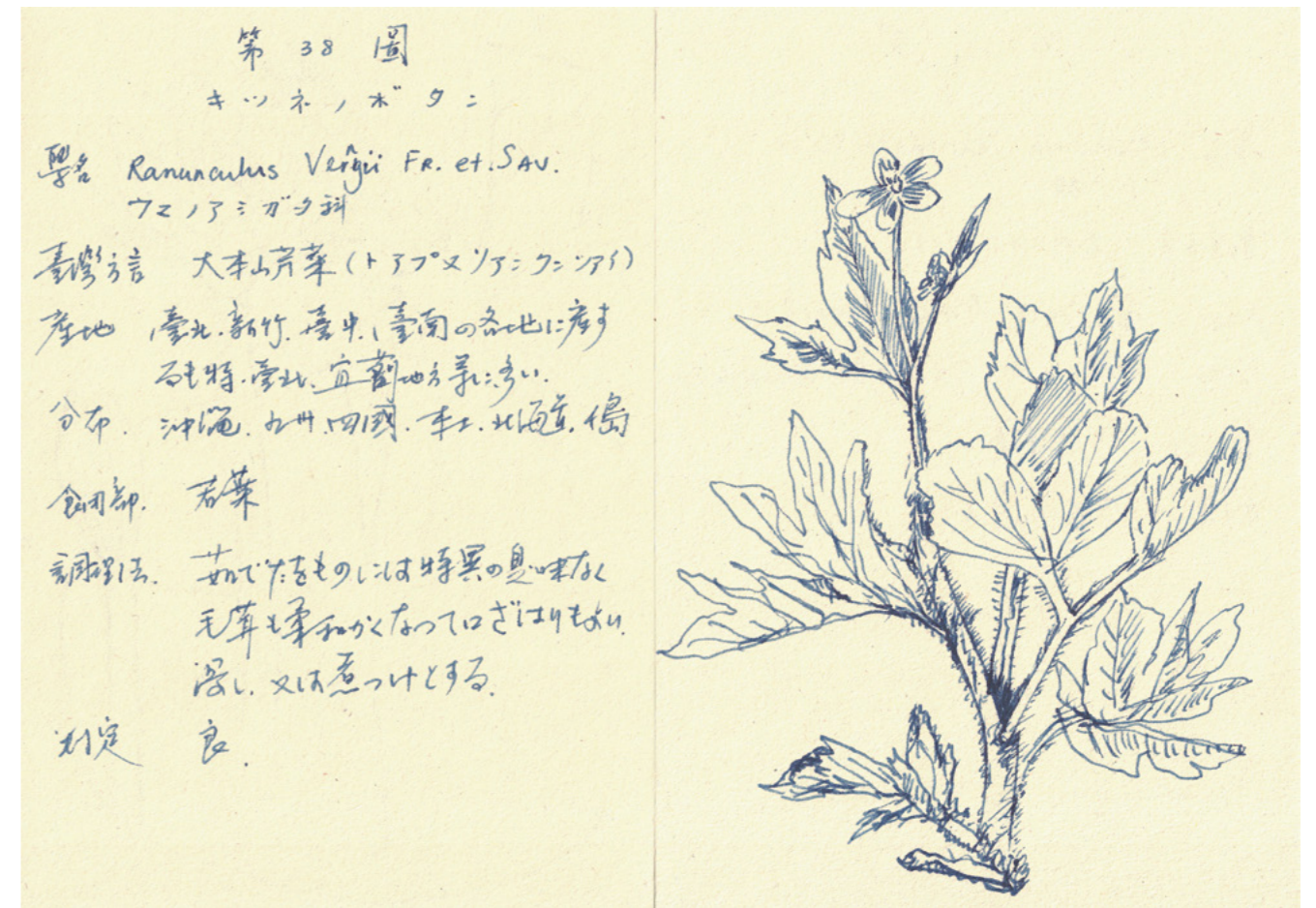
art referred to by the catch-all moniker "viewers". There is a rich counter-history of participatory art that has challenged this by activating viewers as participant observers. Zheng's drawing rituals, including his botanic figure-drawing installations such as *Fern as Method*, engage with this artistic lineage through the transformative way-making of the Dao. They position plants and humans as companion species, and reject visual regimes that construct humans as masterful viewers of others. Zheng's work examines nature not as exterior to human experience, but as a mental attitude in need of careful cultivation, and as a relational compound of the body. Ferns, when conceived as

method, invite a deep restructuring of our understanding of cosmic ecology.

Ferns also play an unforgettable role in Zheng's multipart video series *Pteridophilia* (2016–). These luscious short films portray queer sexual encounters between humans and ferns. Zheng has produced one a year since the project's inception, each filmed in a dense forest in Taiwan. Their collective title, a neologism of the artist's design, marries "pterido-" and "-philia" to denote a fetish or love for pteridophyta plants.

The first of the films shows a group of masculine-presenting Taiwanese people walking delicately, unclothed, through dense green foliage.

# Dao is ubiquitous, and all embracing.



Survival Manual II (Hand-Copied 1945 "Taiwan's Wild Edible Plants"), 2016  
Ink on paper, 105 sheets  
18.4 x 13 cm each

One person holds a fern branch with two hands and pulls it softly towards his mouth, kissing its curving form. The performers grope, fondle, and stroke different plants. Their faces radiate pleasure. In certain, tastefully framed scenes, participants masturbate. The sounds of birds and insects suffuse the audio track, broken only by rough, muffled breathing. The video is gorgeously sexual, accentuated by cinematography that sits between a sensual porn video and arthouse cinema. In the final shot, a glistening fiddlehead wobbles as throaty panting suggests that, off camera, someone is climaxing.

Zheng is drawn to ferns as queer plants. Certain ferns have been described by researchers

as presenting fluid definitions of gender depending on their growth conditions, such as the Gaga fern family (named by scientists, including the Taiwanese botanist Fay-Wei Li, after Lady Gaga). Ferns are also important actors in struggles for decolonisation in Taiwan. The plant is a staple in Indigenous Taiwanese cuisine. Ferns, as edible wild plants, promote a sustainable and plentiful agricultural biodiversity, and contribute to political ecologies that are not dependent on the tools and epistemologies of industrial farming. Though they have previously been ignored by many European and Han Chinese settlers, as well as during the Japanese imperial occupation, they have lately received

# Zheng seeks to construct a new vision of art from the provocative mulch of queer ecosocialist survival.



*After Science Garden, 2018*  
A collaborative project with Diane Willow  
Installation view, Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis



*Weed Plot, 2016*  
Installation view, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing, China



*Survival Manual III (Hand-Copied 1833 “Biko somoku zu”), 2019*  
Ink on paper, 110 sheets, 18.4 x 13 cm each

growing interest through the involvement of Indigenous tribes in ecotourism initiatives. Ferns are flourishing in Taiwan, yet they are also witnesses to the tensions inherent in the reconciliation and social integration promised by the national government’s “new partnership” with Indigenous peoples.

In *Pteridophilia 2* (2018), which debuted at Manifesta 12 in Palermo, Italy, a performer makes love to a bird’s-nest fern before devouring it. It is currently the longest piece in the series, at just over twenty minutes, and a contender for the most vivid of the bunch: the performer depththroats and thrusts an elegant, long-leaved fern, pecking its surface between guttural, wet groans. His kisses evolve into bites and chews as he consumes his partner, filling his mouth with the fern while emitting orgasmic moans.

Zheng’s artworks propagate ideas of a “good Anthropocene”. The good Anthropocene shimmers with the political possibilities seeded by the de-centring of humans within their

environments. Its dreams can be effectively charted through the language of degrowth. Growth is the ideology driving industrial capitalism, whereas degrowth imagines a context in which humans carefully inhabit the planet by dispersing surplus, and thereby redistributing wealth, equally, among the earth’s biomass. In such a system, the hope is that marginalised beings, whether plants or people, can prosper.

Through his planting of weed gardens, daily drawing practices, annual ecosexual deviations, and projects such as the “Botanical Comrades” workshops he is currently hosting as artist in residence at Gropius Bau in Berlin, Zheng seeks to construct a renewed vision of art from the provocative mulch of queer ecosocialist survival. His practice critiques humanist ways of seeing by weaving Daoist and environmental justice concerns into a multispecies community art practice. The result is a vibrant image of the intimacy of human and other-than-human collaboration.

ZHENG BO was born in 1974 in Beijing, and lives on Lantau Island, Hong Kong. Alongside his residency at Gropius Bau in Berlin, he will take part in “Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions” at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich, this autumn. Solo exhibitions have taken place at Kunsthalle Lissabon (2020); Institute of Contemporary Art, Shanghai (2019); Parco Arte Vivente, Turin, Italy (2018). Group shows have included the Yokohama Triennale (2020); “Garden of Earthly Delights”, Gropius Bau, Berlin (2019); and Manifesta 12, Palermo, Italy (2018). He is represented by Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong.

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