

Art as Multispecies Vibrancy

BY ZHENG BO

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ZHENG BO, *Pteridophilia 4*, 2019, from the *Pteridophilia* series (2016–), still from video with color and sound: 16 min. Courtesy the artist.

In 2020, the Point examines how our cultural and sociopolitical systems are implicated in climate change, and what actions the arts industry can take. For this issue, we invited Zheng Bo to discuss non-anthropocentric art and the importance of interspecies collaboration.

The Covid-19 pandemic has achieved what countless human environmental activists have failed to do over the past 50 years since Earth Day was first celebrated on April 22, 1970. Factories were shut. Flights were canceled. People stayed home, tended gardens, and went hiking when possible. Many of us came to the same conclusion: it is okay to do less.

Among the lessons that the virus has taught us, tragically, is that we cannot continue living in the fantasy that we own this planet. We do not. We account for only 0.01 percent of the total biomass on Earth. We have to collaborate with other species, whether we like it or not. This includes addressing the climate crisis and a global ecological meltdown. This also requires us to find a new definition for art.

I started working with plants seven years ago. Interviewers often ask me why I decided to migrate from social practice to ecological practice. My honest reply: it was not decided by me. A patch of vibrant weeds on the former site of the Shanghai Cement Factory—now known as the West Bund—woke me up in the summer of 2013. Plants, insects, and soil called me into action, into claiming the site as my artwork so that it would not be bulldozed and paved over to become a plaza for human-only concerts.

Since then, for every project I claim only half of the credit. The other half belongs to plants and friends. They sculpt and play. I live and breathe.

Many of us in the art world have long abandoned the “genius” trope invented by 16th-century writer Giorgio Vasari. Now it is time for one further step: to abandon the creationist myth of art-making. We are not created by God, and we do not create like God. Without

trees, spiders, and whales, we would never be able to make art. We are inspired by patterns, stories, and ideas that originate in the complex and beautiful web of life on this planet.

In 2016, a botanist took me to a forest on the edge of Taipei, where scientists like him study ferns. Since then I have been going there every year to make one short ecosexual film. I look forward to this annual ritual because the air in the forest is so invigorating. Half awake, we usually go up the hill in the early morning. Once in the

forest, bathing in the sea of oxygen and phytoncides, our bodies and minds reach a heightened level of agility and attentiveness. Plants reveal to us the full potential of a three-dimensional space. Massive bird’s-nest ferns perch on trees. Tiny moss blanket rocks. The light is dramatic, the sound rich, and the aroma intense. The assemblage has a distinct style, yet is constantly changing. This forest is better than any artwork I could ever make, and better than any exhibition I have ever seen.

This series of ecosexual films, *Pteridophilia*, portray intimate encounters between local ferns and local men. I do not know how I came up with this idea. I remember it was difficult to explain it to others, until the first episode was produced. Then, last year, I stumbled on a YouTube video filmed in New South Wales, Australia, by ecologist Colin Bower, showing a wasp—*Lissopimpla excelsa*, the orchid dupe wasp—passionately humping a tongue orchid. “Wow! This is just like my film!” I thought. Or, more accurately, my film is just like this earthly wonder, termed “pseudocopulation” by scientists. In both instances, an animal and a plant are entangled in an interspecies sexual performance. The most “imaginative” idea in my whole artist career was proven to be nothing original. I was simply following orchids and wasps. We stand not on the shoulders of giants, but in billions of years of evolution.

Being outrun by flowers and insects does not mean that we should just give up and do nothing. I learned recently from reading philosophers Roger Ames and David Hall that the Daoist term *wuwei* should be translated not as “no action” or “non-action,” but “non-coercive action that is in accordance with . . . the *de* [focus] of things” contained within one’s field of influence. Conservation scientists have shown that human participation, when practiced wisely, can contribute to biodiversity. A 2019 study concludes that areas managed by Indigenous communities in Australia, Brazil, and Canada have similar levels of vertebrate biodiversity to that of nature reserves. It depends on whether we work with other beings in the planetary garden or exploit them until we all drop dead in the capitalist market. It is time that we define art not as human-only “creation” but the vibrancy of ten thousand beings.