Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council 萬物社
21 June to 23 August 2021

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Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council 萬物社
21 June to 23 August 2021
Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal with Clare Molloy

Opening event: Summer solstice (21 June), 14:00-22:00
Press viewing: 10:00
Press conference: 11:00 including
Press workshop with Zheng Bo:
Ecosensibility Exercises 生態感悟練習– Collecting Tree Qi 採樹氣
in the Gropius Wood
Q&A with Zheng Bo, Stephanie Rosenthal and Clare Molloy

Public opening with booked ticket slots: 14:00-22:00
including workshops Ecosensibility Exercises

Ecosensibility Exercises 生態感悟練習
Workshop schedule

14:00 Drinking Sun Exercise 飲日功
14:30 Drawing Weeds Practice 繪稊修
15:30 Grass Wood Song 草木歌
16:00 Collecting Tree Qi 採樹氣
17:00 Maypole Dance 五月柱
18:00 Collecting Tree Qi 採樹氣
19:00 Maypole Dance 五月柱
20:00 Grass Wood Song 草木歌
20:30 Sacred Grove Ritual 神森禮
21:30 Grass Wood Song 草木歌

“We cannot continue living in the fantasy that humans own this planet. How can art institutions move towards a more-than-human future?” – Zheng Bo, 2021

Ecological crises, political upheaval and global health emergencies increasingly endanger planetary life. For Zheng Bo, such predicaments stem from the delusion of human primacy on Earth. Global repair requires stepping beyond human perspectives and accepting the interrelatedness of all life forms. With Wanwu Council 萬物社, the Gropius Bau is pleased to announce an exhibition by the Hong Kong-based artist and teacher, who was also the Gropius Bau’s In House: Artist in Residence 2020.
Zheng Bo’s art, which is also a form of ecological activism, invites us to reconsider the relationships between nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, equality and ecology. Through films, outdoor participatory exercises and a daily practice of botanical drawing, Zheng Bo takes as his subject the politics of all life forms. From spring 2020, he committed to spending contemplative time with plants every day, drawing, listening and learning from nature. Alongside a new film and workshops, the exhibition brings together the first year of this daily practice, presenting 366 works on paper, drawn primarily in Hong Kong and Berlin.

The story of Zheng Bo’s new series Drawing Life 寫生 (2020–2021) begins with the global pandemic and the abrupt changes in travel, life and individual consciousness that this situation necessitated. Living in Hong Kong and, like many others, facing restrictions on movement, Zheng Bo turned to the most elementary of artistic practices, nature drawing, which requires nothing but simple materials, time and the ability and inclination to observe. Finding an ethical and philosophical imperative through this activity, he describes his thinking: “Nowadays it’s no longer about our abilities to draw. It’s about our willingness to draw, to sit with other lives and draw them.” Although he could often go outside, there were times when, facing a mandatory quarantine after he was able to travel again, he drew the same fern for 14 days, indoors. The resulting contemplative series, Drawing Life 寫生, responds to current global conditions and is a keystone of the exhibition.

Gropius Bau Director Stephanie Rosenthal says: “It is my great pleasure to welcome Zheng Bo back to Berlin. During his 2020 residency, Zheng Bo’s artistic research and practice challenged us to consider more-than-human perspectives, particularly the political life of plants: beings that build communities, work together and make decisions. Wanwu Council 萬物社 has the intention of collectively writing a manifesto to outline how the Gropius Bau can embrace a sustainable, multi-species future—a document that will be a useful tool for organisations around the planet.”

The title of the exhibition, Wanwu Council 萬物社, draws from the Daoist notion of wanwu, a term that means “ten thousand things”, “myriad happenings”, but also “more-than-human”, and designates the infinite possibilities of life in all of its forms. A core action of this exhibition is Zheng Bo’s organisation of the “Wanwu Council”, a group of artists, scientists and activists that will gather in August 2021 in Berlin. Each member of the council will channel another form of life or matter-energy: light, water, seasons, soil, microbes, weeds, plane trees, bees, foxes, communities, histories and spirits. The task of the council is to collectively write a manifesto for a wanwu future.
Additionally, Wanwu Council 萬物社 presents a new film that speculates on the central question Zheng Bo posed during his residency: “How do plants practice politics?” Titled The Political Life of Plants 植物的政治生活 (2021), the c. 30-minute long film has as its protagonist an ancient beech forest in Grumsin, Brandenburg, which is a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site. The film, which was supported by the Schering Stiftung, also features the artist in conversation with Berlin- and Potsdam-base scientists Matthias Rillig and Roosa Laitinen discussing how plants practice politics at a molecular level.

During his residency, entitled Botanical Comrades 植物同志, Zheng Bo hosted events on the start of every solar term, the beginning of a new period in the East Asian lunisolar calendar, which divides a year into 24 solar term periods according to agricultural and astronomical events. This structuring of time intends to “help humans to sense the change of seasons”. From these prototype events, including walk-readings and drawing weeds, stem Zheng Bo’s Ecosensibility Exercises 生態感悟練習(2021). Throughout the exhibition, Zheng Bo is leading exercises, every afternoon, taking place on a new temporary platform built within the “Gropius Wood”, the community of plane trees found west of the Gropius Bau building. These instructions for the Ecosensibility Exercises will also be accessible digitally and can be practiced anytime. Uniting these activities is the artist’s proposal that by overcoming the fiction of human primacy, we can rebuild coexistence for all, interdependent forms of life on Earth.

Wanwu Council 萬物社 frequently draws on the lunisolar calendar’s intuition that life forms and nature contain their own rhythms, an insight that the Gropius Bau has incorporated into its own programme. This exhibition’s schedule of exercises and openings, will begin on the Summer Solstice 夏至, and ends on the 14th solar term, The End of Heat 处暑.

Wanwu Council 萬物社 is curated by Stephanie Rosenthal with Clare Molloy.

Parallel to Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council 萬物社, the Schering Stiftung in Berlin is hosting Zheng Bo’s You are the 0.01% at Unter den Linden 32-34, 10117 Berlin.
Artist Biography

Zheng Bo  
Lantau Island, Hong Kong

Site-Responsive Commissions

2021 Life Is Hard. Why Do We Make It So Easy?, Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden, Hong Kong
2019 You are the 0.01%, Oil Street Art Space, Hong Kong, Hui Ti Xiu, Rooftop Institute, Hong Kong
2018 Life Is Hard. Why Do We Make It So Easy?, Than Bok Khorani National Park, Krabi 
Dune Botanical Garden, UCCA Dune Art Museum, Beidaihe
2017 Kindred, Ming Contemporary Art Museum, Shanghai
2016 Socialism Good, Cass Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood 
Weed Plot, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing
2015 Sing for Her, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong
2013 Plants Living in Shanghai, West Bund, Shanghai

Solo Exhibitions

2021 Wanwu Council 萬物社, Gropius Bau, Berlin 
You are the 0.01%, Schering Stiftung, Berlin
2020 The Soft and Weak Are Companions of Life, Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon
2019 Goldenrod, Institute of Contemporary Art, Shanghai 
Dao is in Weeds, Kyoto City University of Arts Art Gallery, Kyoto
2018 Weed Party III, Parco Arte Vivente, Turin 
Politics of Weeds, Katherine E. Nash Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
2016 Weed Party II + Toad Commons, TheCube Project Space, Taipei 
Weed Commons, Times Museum, Guangzhou
2015 Weed Party, Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai

Group Exhibitions

2021 Liverpool Biennial, 2021 
Guangzhou Image Triennial 2021, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou
From the Mundane World: Inaugural Exhibition, HE Art Museum, Shunde
2020 Yokohama Triennale 2020, Yokohama 
Potential Worlds 2: Eco-Fictions, Migros Museum, Zurich 
A New Order, A New Earth, Garage Rotterdam, Rotterdam 
Interrupted Meals, HOW Art Museum, Shanghai 
Moving Plants, The Palmengarten, Frankfurt 
Even the rocks reach out to kiss you, Transpalette Centre d'art, Bourges
The Topography of a Decade, TheCube Project Space, Taipei
2019 58th Venice Biennale: Performance Programme, Venice
Garden of Earthly Delights, Gropius Bau, Berlin
Fragile Earth: Seeds, Weeds, Plastic Crust, Middlesbrough
Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough
Ecovisionarios: Art for a Planet in a State of Emergency, Matadero Madrid, Madrid
Staring at The Sun, The Art Pavilion, Mile End Park, London
Bruised: Art Action and Ecology in Asia, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
Unexpected Encounters, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga
2018 Manifesta 12, Palermo
The 11th Taipei Biennial, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei
Cosmopolis #1.5: Enlarged Intelligence, Mao Jihong Foundation and Centre Pompidou, Chengdu
Why Listen to Plants?, RMIT Design Hub, Melbourne
The 2nd Yinchuan Biennale, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Yinchuan
Let’s Talk About the Weather: Art and Ecology in a Time of Crisis, Times Museum, Guangzhou
Nature Gone Astray, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Shanghai
2017 In the Name of Plants, OCT, Shenzhen
Kailash Cartographies, Arnold and Sheila Aronson Galleries, New York
2016 The 11th Shanghai Biennale, Power Station of Art, Shanghai
The Age of Experience, Angewandte Innovation Laboratory, Vienna
That Has Been, and May Be Again, Para Site, Hong Kong
Adrift, OCAT, Shenzhen
2014 The 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale, OCAT, Shenzhen
Revolutions Per Minute: Sound Art China, Creative Media Centre, Hong Kong
Random Moments, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong
2013 Shamans & Dissent, Hanart Square, Hong Kong
Occupied, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg Video Art in Asia 2002 to 2012, ZKM, Karlsruhe
Secret Love, Östasiatiska Museet, Stockholm

Residencies
2020 In House: Artist in Residence, Gropius Bau, Berlin
2018 Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong
2016 Pernod Ricard Fellow, Villa Vassilieff, Paris Kailash Cartographies, Kathmandu
2015 The Cube Project Space, Taipei

Education
2012 PhD, Visual & Cultural Studies, University of Rochester, Rochester
2005 MFA, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
1999 BA, Computer Science and Fine Arts, Amherst College, Amherst
Teaching
2013- Associate Professor, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong
2010-13 School of Inter-Media Art, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou

Works in Collections
Power Station of Art, Shanghai Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing
Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong
Singapore Art Museum, Singapore Cass Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Gropius Bau

Zheng Bo: On Drawing Life

Last spring, when the pandemic hit, I finally stopped traveling. I had wanted to spend some time getting to know the plants that live around me – my plant neighbours – but I had always been tempted by invitations from other places, Kyoto, Shanghai, Taipei, Guangzhou.

Now I finally had time to go up the hill behind the village every day. It’s a short hike, about twenty minutes, and I would get off the main trail and walk up an old path, made of large stones supposedly laid down by prisoners.

I would encounter thousands, millions of plants. When something caught my attention, I would stop, find a place to sit, and draw. But I also know that it doesn’t matter what I decide to draw – every plant is fascinating when I really look, even the most common one. I’m drawing living plants. It’s a practice to see life, to sense life, and to record life, albeit in a very limited way. Initially I was curious to learn the names that our ancestors and scientists have given to the plants. I used two apps, one book, and two websites to make sure that I got the right identification. After a while, finding out the name was no longer important.

I would often draw a habitat, not a single individual. Hong Kong is a subtropical place. Plants grow densely together. There are many vines. So it doesn’t make sense to single out an individual plant.

I like to sit close to them, to be physically intimate. This limits my scope of vision. So I tend to draw small plants, rather than large trees. (Only in Berlin did I start to draw trees.)

Drawing is a simple practice. All I need is a piece of paper, a pencil, and a clipboard. For one year, I have used up only three B6 pencils. So this is a carbon-light way to keep myself engaged.

Drawing in nature is a good life. It’s an easy way to have a good life. Even when it got very hot in Hong Kong, after sitting down for a while, after my mind settles down, I would feel the breeze. And often after I calmed down, a butterfly or some other life would land on the drawing to accompany me.

Now, as things are gradually returning to ‘normal’, I’m getting busier again. So it’s becoming harder to find time to draw.

If I didn’t get to draw during the day, I would draw at night some plants in the village.
This spring, lychee trees in the village blossomed spectacularly. So I drew their flowers and bulging fruits often. One neighbor, Sister Meichi, noticed that I like drawing, and asked me to draw a lychee tree on her family land. The tree was planted by her late father, and was in full bloom.

For the solar term Greater Snow, from 7 December to 20 December 2020, I drew the same plant for fourteen days. We (my partner and I and Sesame, our 13-year old yorkie) came back to Hong Kong from Berlin and had to quarantine in a hotel room. We brought a tiny tree fern from Portugal back to Hong Kong with us. The small plant was growing every day. You can see a new frond unfurling over time in the drawings.

Plants probably don’t care if I draw them. It’s really just for me to cultivate myself. But perhaps they also enjoy my sitting with them for a while. They must also feel my qi, and can tell if I’m feeling peaceful or not.

The drawings have been shown already a few times in China, usually one or two sets. Others’ interest in this project surprised me. Any art student can draw like this. Perhaps nowadays it’s no longer about our abilities to draw. It’s about our willingness to draw, to sit with other lives and draw them.

Zheng Bo

Lantau Island, May 2021
Q&A with Zheng Bo

Gropius Bau: Your exhibition Wanwu Council 萬物社 refers to the Daoist term wanwu. Can you explain this particular expression?

Zheng Bo: The term wanwu in contemporary Chinese is understood as everything between sky and earth and can be translated as “myriad happenings”. Wan in Chinese literally means ten thousand; wu in today’s understanding is an object, but in traditional philosophy it can also be a phenomenon, a happening – all forms of being. My practice has centred on plants, which are, of course, part of wanwu. Within the plant kingdom there are billions of beings that should never be considered alone since they are also bridges to other forms of life.

Gropius Bau: During your time as In House: Artist in Residence at the Gropius Bau in 2020 you asked: “How do plants practice politics?” Could you explain what you mean by this question and what led you to it?

Zheng Bo: I’ve been working with plants in my art practice for ten years and for me it’s more important to cultivate sensibilities than to produce works or projects. Now when I encounter a plant, I can immediately sense their biological being – I can sense their life – but I still can’t sense their political being the way that I sense a person’s political being when I encounter a human. For example, when I am walking on the street in Hong Kong or Berlin and someone passes by, I’m very sensitive to that person’s age, perhaps gender, maybe sexuality, ethnic heritage, social class and aesthetic style, and therefore gain a lot of insights into that person’s political being. I think it’s important that we can sense other forms of life in these dimensions, too, because if we really want to move into a future where we don’t see ourselves as the centre of the world, we need to treat “non-human” beings with respect and equality. That’s why I started a film project called The Political Life of Plants (2021) during my residency in Berlin, because I often feel the importance of art is to push myself to really open up, to try to answer a strange question like this: How can I sense the political life of plants?

Gropius Bau: Your artistic and scientific approach is very closely connected to the solar terms, which is why your exhibition Wanwu Council 萬物社 at the Gropius Bau is structured according to them. Could you explain how the lunisolar calendar guides your practice?
Zheng Bo: We are so used to the week, month and year, the calendar that structures our lives globally and caters to the capitalist mode of production and consumption. Whereas the lunisolar calendar was developed to help humans to sense the change of seasons. For me this is a very simple way to cultivate our ecosensibility. Temporal and spatial dimensions are just so inconspicuously influential to our worldview, so it’s crucial to start with the way we set time.

Gropius Bau: In August 2021, you will meet with a group of scientists, activists and gardeners in a three-day-meeting in Berlin, dedicated to writing a manifesto on how a sustainable future could be envisioned. Why are you interested in the idea of a “council” and what are you anticipating through the encounter with these experts?

Zheng Bo: In the “Wanwu Council” twelve human participants – scientists, activists, gardeners, politicians and artists – will come together to channel different forms of being such as plane trees, foxes, microbes and spirits to think about how a cultural institution like the Gropius Bau can move towards a more-than-human future. I initiated this provocation, but what will actually happen very much depends on the collective wisdom of the group. I imagine that we all share a strong commitment to a vibrant, ecological future, but the question of how to move an institution like the Gropius Bau is a challenging one. I think anything more-than-human is incredibly challenging, because we live in an anthropocentric era. Almost all of us have grown up receiving education, looking at art, walking around, designing space and participating in politics from an anthropocentric worldview. The “Wanwu Council” will offer an opportunity to spend three days together trying to live, think, walk and imagine beyond the anthropocentric perspective. And I’m hoping that future councils could be organised, by others perhaps, and eventually a council could be set up more permanently.

Gropius Bau: For the Ecosensibility Exercises 生態感悟練習 (2021) you will conduct different workshops with visitors on a daily basis. What is your interest in working together with the people on site? And can you explain some of the exercises?

Zheng Bo: There will be six exercises. I will be guiding them every day during the exhibition. Visitors can join me on the platform outside, amid the plane trees, to draw, to interact with the energy of the trees, to sing for them, to honour them, and to dance with them. The aim of these Ecosensibility Exercises is to leave behind the human-centric in our lives. We are so insensitive to other forms of life, to energies and materialities. We, including myself, need
to become more ecosensitive. I think many of us now realise that we are in a planetary ecological crisis and we know that we need to change. Perhaps our ideology has already shifted, but having a different ideology doesn’t always mean that we have changed our practice. So, for me, an important part of our transformation is to change our sensibilities so that when we walk around, we don’t ignore plants, and can sense their lives even without focused attention, and that we always feel a sense of humility. These exercises are practices for myself but the intention, of course, is that visitors to the exhibition will join me perhaps once or twice and then continue practicing in their own daily lives.
Further Information and Contact

Press Images
A selection of image material is available here in printable resolution. For media coverage of the exhibition Zheng Bo: Wanwu Council 萬物社 (21 June to 23 August 2021), the images may be downloaded and used without license to announce the exhibition prior to and during the exhibition period. Please note that images may not be cropped, overprinted or manipulated. The use of the images is free as long as sources are properly credited.

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Press Contacts
Helena Zedig
Pickles PR
helena@picklespr.com
+44 (0)7803 596 587

Joseph Lamb
Pickles PR
joseph@picklespr.com
+44 (0)7432 245 565

Contact
Gropius Bau
presse@gropiusbau.de
+49 30 254 86 -129 / -123

Opening Hours
Wednesday to Monday 10:00-19:00
Tuesday closed

Tickets
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