

## Mysteries of Plants: A Post-Humanist Reading

### 植物的秘仪：一种后人类主义解读

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#### The Mind of Plants: Understanding Non-Human Intelligence

For seven months, Liu Wa and Yang Bao traveled in the western United States and Gansu, China—an 11,000-mile journey resembling Odysseus's epic tales and an adventure of mutual discovery and co-existence with plants. Inspired by the light and shadow of day and night in nature, the two artists simultaneously used hypnotizing colors and rhythms in video, painting, music and installation to explore the subjectivity of plants from multiple perspectives.

To view plants as others rather than objects means that we must treat various non-human entities as our equal. As Liu said in an interview, "The intent of these works is not to anthropomorphize the plants, but to 'vegetalize' our human perceptions." Philosopher Michael Marder argues that the etymology of vegetation originated from the medieval Latin word *vegetabilis*, which means "to grow" or "to flourish." It challenges our stereotypical misunderstanding of plants being static; on the contrary, plants should symbolize the abundance and exuberance of life. The artists' exhibition "Late Night Savage" presents us the dramatic and nuanced poetry of a moving image with

an ever-evolving audio-visual experience, in which three plants—sunflower, camel grass and tumbleweed—weave together variable perspectives in a sweeping landscape charged with wild and ferocious energy bursting between sky and earth. The plants represented in the exhibition neither participate in human-centric narratives nor exist as objects for the production of human knowledge. Instead, they call attention to the subjectivity of plants. The plants' growth, breathing, and movement constitute a non-animal form of biopolitics that challenges our deep-rooted understanding of plants, which requires us to liberate ourselves from the epistemological tradition of rationalism and to expand our sensibilities. Jeffrey Nealon (2015) calls on us to consider plants as the key for biopolitics. Critical theories in humanism often take animal life as the main biopolitical paradigm, while plants have hitherto been neglected.

It is worth noting that these impressive botanic subjects in "Late Night Savage" are not only different from the flowers, vegetables and fruits commonly seen in still life paintings, but also different from the highly objectified

flora in the scientific study of botany. Such visualization and objectification of plants represent two mainstream research paradigms closely associated with taxonomy. As a result, plants have often been reduced to epistemic and aesthetic objects that are static and inert. This long-standing anthropocentric epistemological model has finally been criticized in the fields of art, humanities, and social sciences in recent years, thanks to contemporary academic works on post-humanism and new materialism that have creatively contributed to plant-focused theories. The practice of Bao and Liu integrates this transformative post-human perspective to push the limits of plant perception. To some extent, their endeavor also touches on the metaphysics of consciousness and the nature of the self. The artists regard plants as intelligent beings or agents, urging us to recognize the limitations of human perception and knowledge.

## 植物的心灵：认识非人类智能

历时七个月，在美国西部和甘肃两地，刘娃与鲍杨进行的这场总计一万七千公里的长途旅行如同宏大而漫漫的奥德修斯之旅，也是一场和植物互相寻找、与植物共同生活的冒险历程。在昼与夜的光影流转之中，在色彩与节奏的迷幻更迭之中，两位艺术家分别利用影像、绘画与音乐等媒介输出共时性的表达，全方位探索了植物的主观性感知层次。

植物作为“他者”而非作为“客体”，意味着我们必须平等地对待异质性的非人类实体（non-human entities）。正如刘娃在访谈中所言，“此次展览的目的并非意在将植物拟人化，而是强化和植物化（vegetalize）人类的感官。”哲学家迈克·马尔德（Michael Marder, 2011）指出植物（vegetation）的词源可以追溯到中古拉丁语 *vegetabilis*，意思是“生长”或“蓬勃发展”。这颠覆了我们对植物静止不动的刻板印象；相反，植物本身象征着生命的丰盈与旺盛。《午夜魑魅》就以其连绵不绝的视听语言向我们呈现出一部深婉激荡的影像之诗，其中我们所看到的三种植物——向日葵、骆驼草和风滚草——构成了彼此呼应的离散性视角，兀自在天地之间迸发出荒蛮而残酷的能量。它们既无意参与人类主导的叙事，也无意作为产出人类知识的客体而存在。这些植物的主体性深深扎根于观者的脑海之中，它们的生长、呼吸、运动构成了一种非动物式生命政治，这要求我们对植物的认知从旧有的理性主义认识论传统中解放出来，重新配置我们的感性。杰弗里·尼伦（Jeffrey Nealon, 2015）呼吁我们将植物作为思考生命政治的关键，人文主义批判理论往往将动物生命作为主要的生命政治范式，植物因此成为了一种被遗忘的生命形式。

值得注意的是，《午夜魑魅》中这些让人印象深刻的植物主体既不同于那些静物绘画中常见的花卉蔬果，也有别于那些植物科学著作中高度客观化的认知对象。因为这两种视域分别代表着主流的视觉化和客观化的知识模式，与分类学实践紧密相连，于是植物往往被简化为一种稳定的、静止的认知/审美客体。这种僵化已久的人类中心主义式的认知模式在近些年终于在艺术、人文和社会科学领域得到批判，很大程度上得益于当前关于后人类主义和新唯物主义的学术著作作为关于植物的批判性思考贡献了创造性能量。刘娃与鲍杨的创作深深融入了这种变革性的后人类视角，两人联手探索植物式感知的阈值极限。此类尝试在某种程度上也触及了关于意识和自我本质的形而上学问题，它将植物视为一种广义上的智能体（intelligence）或者能动者（agent），帮助我们认识到人类感知和知识的有限性。

## Becoming Weeds: the Biopolitics of Plants

Sunflower, camel grass and tumbleweed are all drought-tolerant and saline-alkali-resistant plants. Behind their perseverance is the military history of nuclear sites and geopolitics. Sunflowers—as a cheap corrective method—were once planted in Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union to clean up nuclear contamination. Camel grass is found growing around the nuclear base in the Gobi Desert in Gansu, China. As an invasive species whose seeds are easily dispersed in the wind, tumbleweeds exacerbate the spread of nuclear pollution in Washington State in the United States. Initially, the artists were interested in the plants as iconic symbols of the history of the Cold War, but they gradually deviated from the human-centric narrative, because they no longer regarded plants as mere specimens of localized geographical archives. As they were chasing after tumbleweeds, the artists witnessed the tremendous vitality of plants that traveled and thrived regardless of man-made boundaries. In the end, the artists chose to represent the narratives and memories of plants on their own terms.

Historical context is not directly introduced in the exhibition with writings; it is a haunting ghost lurking in the background, conjuring a certain tension in contrast to the vibrant and sensuous artwork. While the threat of nuclear bomb foreshadows death at the end of human history, plants continue to flourish and expand their territories regardless. This tension between the finite and the infinite as well as death and life conjures up a dark yet sublime post-humanistic spectacle for us, signifying that the cosmic order is quietly undergoing transitions in the Anthropocene Epoch. Plants too have agency, and they participate in the making of the complex multi-species universe. As active agents in the power structure, plants have equal ontological status as humans.

For a long time, binary thinking has been deeply ingrained in our consciousness, giving rise to a wide range of dichotomies: subject vs. object, body vs. mind, material vs. spiritual, human vs. nature, etc. Such an epistemological model is not only overly simplified but also based on the exploitative relationship between humans and other species in the environment.

“Usefulness” is one of the key terms closely related to human-centrism. For example, the value of plants is usually measured by its utility: cherry trees provide food, and oak trees provide wood. In contrast, tumbleweeds—the weeds that savagely invade human habitats—draw the difference between plant productivity and plant growth. Scrutinizing this demarcation helps us envision a less exploitative relationship between humans and plants. It also guides us to distance ourselves from the logic of utilitarianism by revealing the limitations of human ethics. Indeed, to disrupt the narrative of progressivism since the Enlightenment does not mean that we should give up everything and unequivocally embrace the aesthetics of disaster. Plants do not provide solutions to crises. They only force us to face the consequences of ecological, social, political and intellectual progression, to face our own vulnerability and to critically re-examine modernity itself.

In contrast to weeds—the undisciplined, marginalized plants—horticultural plants are often employed as a metaphor for the planning of nation state. It reflects control, order, and a specific type of governance. For example, Zygmunt Bauman compares the development of modernity to the transition from “wild culture” to “garden culture” (Zygmunt Bauman, 1989). He uses the term “gardening state” to allude to the modernist biopolitical model of rational governance that imposes violence through eugenics. As we have observed, tumbleweeds are like nomads in the wilderness. Their migrations are contingent and uncertain. They have no practical value and cannot be controlled by territorial sovereignties. The biopolitics embodied in weeds frustrates humans’ attempt at assigning it a particular place in the hierarchy of existence. Tumbleweeds put down their roots in undesirable places and extend their reach by reproducing themselves in different locales around the world (Marder, 2012). Perhaps plants have perceived a world that has hitherto been overlooked and neglected by humans, in which the hierarchy of the “higher” and the “lower” species has fallen apart.

## 成为杂草：植物的生命政治

向日葵、骆驼草和风滚草同属耐旱性、抗盐碱的植物，它们隐忍坚韧的习性背后却藏着一段和核基地、地缘政治格局相关的军事历史：向日葵曾被作为净化苏联切尔诺贝利核污染的低成本作物而种植；骆驼草分布在甘肃核城周围的戈壁滩上；风滚草则作为入侵美国的外来物种，由于其随风播种的特性，甚至加剧了华盛顿州核污染的扩散。据了解，艺术家的创作兴趣始于提取植物作为冷战历史的象征性符号，尔后却渐渐偏离了被人类叙事主宰的原初视角，因为并不满足于仅仅将植物视为一种地方性的物质档案。他们在寻找、追随风滚草的途中见证了它们无视人类的疆域或福祉而生长的巨大能量，最终选择了直呈植物的言说与记忆本身。

沉重的历史在此并没有依赖于语词或文字记录直接在场，它成了隐匿的、萦绕不去的幽灵。这和鲜活而敏感的影像之间产生了某种矛盾性张力：如果说这背后的核阴影提供了某种死亡的征兆，仿佛令人直窥人类历史的尽头；那么植物却不以为然地野蛮扩张，因为它们的生命与历史还在延续。正是这种有限性与无限性、死与生的对立刺穿了浓重的虚无感，为我们上演了一幕后人类主义式的“黑暗崇高”，提示着人类纪的背景之下宇宙秩序已经悄然更替：植物也具备能动性，并且参与、构成了这个复杂的多物种世界。植物作为权力关系网络中的参与者，和人类一样具有本体论上的平等地位。

一直以来，二分法的思维在我们的观念中根深蒂固，制造了种种对立的概念组合：主体 - 客体，身体 - 心灵，物质 - 精神，人类 - 自然……这种认知模式不仅是高度简化的，而且建立在人类对环境、对其他物种的剥削与利用之上。“有用性”是那些与人类主义中心观念息息相关的核心技术语之一，譬如植物生命价值的典型结构通常由其效用来定义：樱桃树提供食物，橡树提供木材。相较之下，风滚草作为一种野蛮入侵人居环境的“杂草”，它分离了植物生产性繁殖和生长这两个概念，帮助我们想象人类与植物之间不那么具有剥削性的经济关系，教导我们远离效用的逻辑，揭示了人类伦理的局限性。当然，打破启蒙运动以来的人类进步主义叙事并不意味着我们可以全身而退，转而拥抱彻头彻尾的灾难美学。植物并不提供任何解决危机的方案，它只是迫使我们面对生态、社会、政治和知识变革的进程，直面我们自身的脆弱性，重新反思和批判现代性本身。

## Lending the Body to the Cosmos

By learning how the artists have changed course in their creative thinking, we witness a plant-like process of growth—Liu and Bao started from a knowledge-oriented anthropological approach and subsequently shifted to a phenomenological study of the inner life and rhythm of plants. Plants are constantly adapting and adjusting their relationship with the external world. To think like plants is to not confine oneself, but to immerse oneself in symbiosis with other species and to continuously learn from the stimuli in the environment. During the process of filming tumbleweeds, the artists had to throw themselves into one unpredictable expedition after another, because the sightings of tumbleweeds were highly uncertain. They accepted contingency and disorder of the world in chaos,

与杂草这种不受规训的“边缘植物”相对应的则是园艺植物。这让人想到园艺经常被用作国家规划的隐喻，它反映了管控、秩序和特定类型的治理。譬如，齐格蒙特·鲍曼（Zygmunt Bauman, 1989）将现代性的展开比作从“荒野文化”（wild culture）向“园艺文化”（garden culture）转变的过程，他用“园艺国家”（gardening state）的比喻来描述现代性通过优化生命来施加暴力的理性治理的生命政治模式。正如我们所观察到的，风滚草就像荒野中的游牧民族，其行动轨迹充满了偶然性和不定性，不具备实用效能亦不受领土主权控制。这种杂草所代表的生命政治倾向于挫败人类将其置于存在等级中的特定位置的企图，它们“在不受欢迎的地方扎根，在不同的空间中不服从地自我复制”（Marder, 2012）。也许植物构想了一个迄今为止不被看见的、被忽视的世界，其中“高级”与“低级”物种的等级制度业已分崩离析。

and availed themselves of spontaneity. Like plants, they embraced the vast and boundless universe and immersed themselves in plant consciousness.

The second room of the exhibition presents four pieces of paintings and sound installation by the two artists. On each of Liu's paintings, Bao introduces a black geometric shape—a symbolic black hole—from which his minimalist chance music composition emanates and mutates. The ever-evolving soundscape composed of infinite combinations of sounds is complemented by the hallucinating visual impressions of the plants, altogether generating an emotional power in pure forms. Heraclitus stated, one cannot step into the same river twice. Likewise, the viewer cannot have the same sensory experience twice in this holistic space. The sense of time is expanded, when the viewer listens to the mesmerizing sound in flux. As one's body moves in space, the soundscape changes, and a phantasmagoric spectacle cascades from the depths of darkness. Human subjectivity is then on the verge of dissolving, while the spiritual universe of plants arises.

On the one hand, global warming, accelerated extinction of wild lives and ecological collapse in the Anthropocene force us to recognize the fact that our future lies in the deep and complex interconnection with other living beings; on the other hand, this interspecies alliance based on survival needs is not only political but also affective. It calls to mind the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which provides an inseparable and indivisible structure of the mind, body and the cosmos. He believes that "to lend the body to the world" is the only way for humans to be part of the cosmos and to represent it. In this sense, the encounter between humans and plants is also the interface between different bodily entities in a holistic cosmos; when we move around in the exhibition space, our bodies interact with paintings, music and the entire environment. Merleau-Ponty's favorite painter, Cézanne, once said, "The landscape contemplates itself within me, and I am its consciousness." Being in this emotionally-charged space, I become aware of the plants and the cosmos; at the same time, the plants and the cosmos are silently and affectionately meditating on themselves within me.

## 把身体借给世界

就两位艺术家的创作思路所发生的转变来看，从最初的偏重知识导向的人类学立场，再到对植物的内在生命与感性节律的关注，我们从中目睹了一场植物式的生长过程：植物总在灵活地调节自己与外部、与世界之间的关系。植物式的思维，其基始点恰恰在于不将自己封锁在自身内部，而是生活在与其他实体的广泛的联系之中，从经验和环境的刺激中持续进行学习。在拍摄的过程中，风滚草的出现具有很大的不确定性，刘娃和鲍杨于是追随着风滚草的行走踪迹，将自己掷入不可预测的旅程中。这种“扰乱”毋宁说是接受了世界的偶然性与无序性，从人类既定的理性轨道上偏离，像植物一样纵身投入广阔无垠的宇宙中，使个人的生命体验与植物的意识交融一体。

展览的第二部分则呈现了由刘娃与鲍杨合作的四件绘画 - 声音装置。鲍杨根据其作曲的结构，在刘娃的每张绘画作品上都“切开”了一个几何形的黑洞，从中递出偶发性音乐的律动节拍。不同的曲目在无限的自由组合中参差交错，伴随浓厚的幻觉的生成与消亡，如此循环往复交相辉映，饱含纯形式的情感力量。每次踏入这富有整体性的场域，便诚如赫拉克利特（Heraclitus）所言“不能两次踏入同一条河流”一般，随着时间意识的绵延而聆听到丰富、多变而复杂的声音之流，随着身体移动获得不同层次的知觉体验，置身于一种宛如从黑暗深处喷发出的幻变图景中。人的主体意识濒临消解，旋即被卷入到植物的灵性宇宙。

一方面，人类纪的经验包括全球变暖、野生动植物的加速消亡以及生态系统的破坏，使我们不得不面对众生之间深刻而复杂的相互联系，让我们意识到只有在与其他身体的联系中才有未来；另一方面，这种基于生存需要的跨物种联盟不单单具有政治性，也充盈着情动之力。这让人想起法国哲学家梅洛 - 庞蒂（Maurice Merleau-Ponty），他的身体现象学提供了一种由心灵、身体和世界三者构成的互相蕴含、不可分割的结构，他认为“把身体借给世界”（Merleau-Ponty, 1964）是人进入世界并使世界呈现的唯一方式。从这种意义上说，人与植物的相遇，也是不同的身体界面之间在整体性的世界场域之中的相遇；当我们在展览空间中移动时，身体与绘画、音乐连同整个环境一起互相包含渗透。梅洛 - 庞蒂最喜爱的画家塞尚说过一句话，“风景在我之内思考它自身，我就是它的意识”（Merleau-Ponty, 1996）。置身于在这片暗流涌动的场域中，我意识到了植物和世界；与此同时，植物、世界也在我身上静默而深情地沉思着它们自身。



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