

"Does the flower hear the bee?"

15th Shanghai Biennale

Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 8 November 2025 to

31 March 2026

REVIEWS

The 15th Shanghai Biennale—"Does the flower hear the bee?"—opens with a small forest. Suspended from the cavernous ceiling of the Power Station of Art (PSA) are thousands of synthetic yellow trumpet blossoms that hang rootless in the air, some spilling onto the ground. Titled *Phantom Forest* (2025), Allora & Calzadilla's installation references *Handroanthus chrysanthus*, a tree species native to Central and South America. Sometimes used in landscape design for their aesthetic appeal, these trees contribute to the vital biodiversity of their native environments that are threatened by legacies of resource extraction and impacts of climate change. For the artists, this work connects movement and displacement to a gesture of "building a system of memory" by asking what it means, figuratively, to move this tree to Shanghai. When visiting, I found myself pondering: what if the artists had chosen to produce an "ugly" tree? Would that have shifted the work too directly from aesthetic to political dimensions, or is the choice of beauty a valuable entry point into a political discussion? This ghostly tree also invites participation: the audience is welcome to take fallen blossoms, many of which are also unknowingly transported on the soles of shoes across the museum—furthering their displacement.

In many ways, *Phantom Forest* encapsulates the experience of this exhibition as one of reverence for the natural sublime. Curated by Kitty Scott with Daisy Desrosiers, Xue Tan, and PSA's Emerging Curators Long Yitang and Zhang Yingying, this gargantuan biennial encompasses 67 artists and more than 250 artworks. The exhibition aims to centre sensorial engagements with and across artworks by looking to interspecies communication among the non-human world for inspiration and teaching, as suggested by its title. While the natural world and its alternative methods of communication are explored, humans nevertheless seemed to remain the protagonists. For example, Rirkrit Tiravanija's text-based work *untitled 2019 (the form of the flower is unknown to the seed)* (2019) mounts the eponymous phrase in capital letters on an entrance wall. Originally commissioned by ICA London in 2019, its prior presentation encompassed a sake bar that was intended for use. In Shanghai, a space for tea and gathering is located elsewhere in the PSA. Recontextualized within the Biennale's exploration of cross-species communication, Tiravanija's text takes on new meaning as a reflection of how nature is used as a metaphor or subject in contemporary art, where it often appears as a non-active participant against perspectives that are still human-centric. While the flowering of human interactions can certainly produce many unexpected forms, how is it possible to assume the knowledge of seeds?

Landscape, and its history of representation, is also a dominant thread. Continuing his fascination with 19th-century Romanticism, Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson contributes video, performance, and

by Yasmin Nurmig-Por

five unexpected large-scale oil paintings of Icelandic landscapes titled *Weekdays in Arcadia* (2025). These paintings feature vast rocky and mossy scenes characteristic of Iceland with only the most miniscule figures of humans and sheep. While beautiful representations, these works intentionally set Iceland within Western art-historical traditions of landscape, which feels slightly at sea in the context of Shanghai.

The space between human and natural worlds is more closely explored by works such as Cheng Xinhao's video *Stratums and Erratics* (2023–2024), which responds to the limitations imposed by borders on landscapes. In this 50-minute film, the artist is depicted walking 800 kilometres on roads in the landlocked Yunnan province, from Kunming to the China-Myanmar (Burma) limits while kicking the same rock that is eventually reduced to a pebble. In a captivating and perplexing test of endurance, the artist moves across urban, rural, and other natural contexts, eventually tossing the rock in a river at the walk's conclusion. The work prods at the collaboration between humans, living things, and natural matter raised elsewhere in the exhibition, such as by Aki Inomata's *How to Carve a Sculpture* (2018–ongoing). Inomata placed wood in beaver enclosures in five zoos in Japan; after the wood was chewed by the animals, the artist removed it and, through a mixture of working with sculptors and CNC (computer-automated) machines, further "collaborated" to resolve the sculptures. Included in this list of collaborators are the longhorned beetles who continued to burrow inside the wood. Presented on two plinths, the sculptures at beaver and human (or CNC) scale are compelling pseudo-modernist sculptures. Yet, what does it mean to "collaborate" with non-human actors without equal continued agency? In this context, approaching animal interventions as ready-mades may offer a counterpoint to the singularity of human authorship. Acknowledging animal mark-making

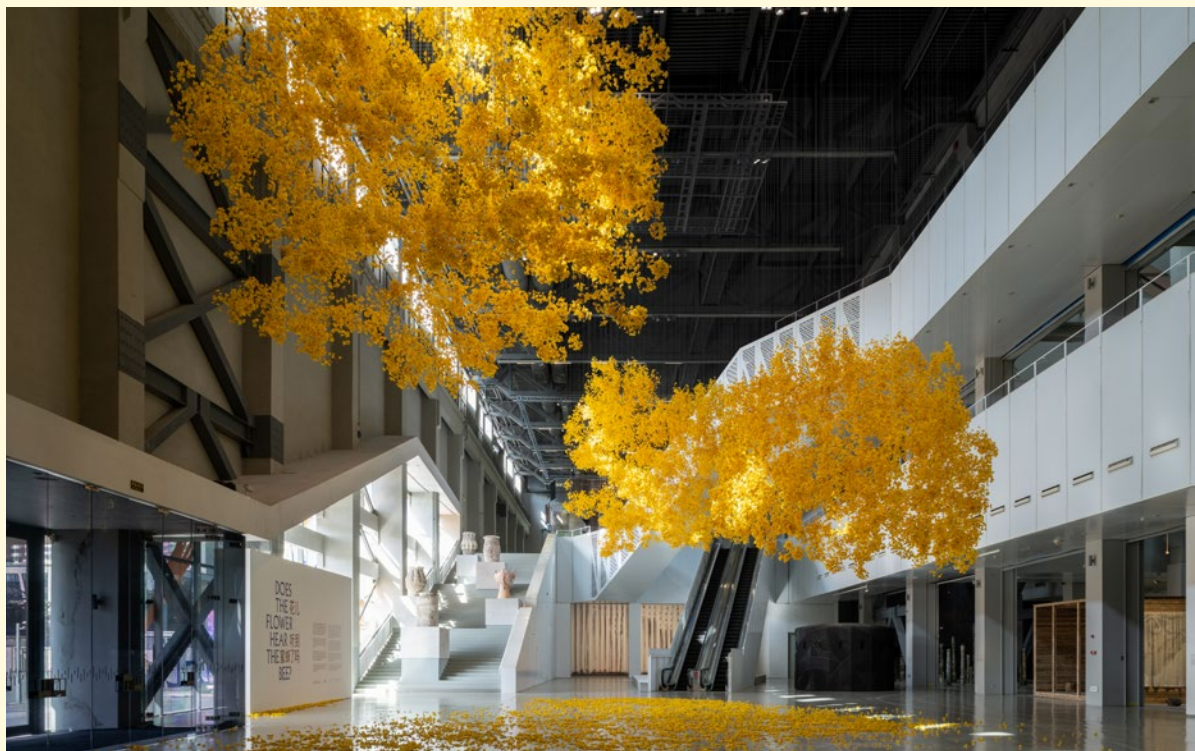
could potentially radically challenge understandings of interspecies collaboration within artistic and creative processes.

With an exhibition title focused on hearing, sonic works, or those that allude to sound, are given particular emphasis. Brian Jungen's *Pull to Refresh* (2025) presents an oak piano shot with hand-made arrows. Here, I imagined the noises and sounds produced in its creation as a kind of score, and the sculpture itself as a record of the performance. Tania Candiani's *Prólogo. 7 Campanas* (2024) suspends a series of large-scale wicker and rattan "pods" in the shape of large cones or hats that visitors can enter to experience different soundscapes such as cows calling, rivers rushing, or wind blowing. Despite the array of different sounds, the works produce an inviting sonic landscape. Christine Sun Kim's large-scale mural *Heavy Relevance* (2024) uses distorted musical notation to create an experimental score. On a wall, the musical staff bars in Kim's score dip under the suggested heavy weight of single notes, forming peaks and valleys. In reference to ASL communication where the usage of signs is responsive to specific contexts, the artist expands the implication of sound to architectural levels, or a kind of sonic landscape.

The Biennale also included off-site projects, most notably at the Jia Yuan Hai Art Museum. Located in a rural setting, US-based French artist Maxime Cavajani displayed a series of works made while in residence on Fogo Island. With a research focus on the use of red on the island, as an alchemical reaction between ochre and blood, these works brought markers from one geographic location to another—here, red against the yellow-green of the surrounding agricultural area.

Collectively, the scale of this biennial and its various exhibition spaces evoke a series of microclimates brought together with both congruent and contesting cross-pollinations. While the beauty of landscape and nature is visually celebrated, the challenges of translation (across species and language) remain a gap in communication. For me, one of the clearest and most poignant takeaways from the Shanghai Biennale is that there is a dif-

Allora & Calzadilla, *Penumbra and Phantom Forest*, 2025; installation view from "Does the flower hear the bee?" 2025, 15th Shanghai Biennale, Power Station of Art
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ference between sound and hearing, and between being heard and being understood. In our contemporary moment of increased political and environmental crisis, many of us are grasping at other ways of knowing that might lead to a new direction. Unique from many other international biennials, Shanghai's has an increased level of governmental support and orchestration: while visiting, I learned that all artists and artworks are subject to offi-

cial approval for inclusion. As part of the international art press, I found my own body in the space of unexpected cross-pollination: invited to the opening reception dinner—a boat cruise on the Huangpu River—my presence as a Canadian journalist was met with surprise by my consulate. I had entered visa-free using my European passport, without realizing that my Canadian passport might have made my visit more challenging. Akin to my quick en-

gagement with Shanghai, the immersive works in the exhibition remain those most resonant and visually effective within the production of the natural sublime and its entanglements with human-based assumptions and desires.

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"DOKU! DOKU! DOKU!: samsara.exe" — Lu Yang
Amant, New York City, 18 September 2025 to 15 February 2026

by Gladys Lou

Lu Yang employs the logics of gaming and Buddhist reincarnation to examine existentialism in a post-human, virtual context—one in which identities can be created and selected like game characters, yet alienation persists despite seemingly infinite freedom. "DOKU! DOKU! DOKU!: samsara.exe" at Amant, the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in New York, unfolds as an exploration of the self through the genderless digital avatar DOKU, named after the Japanese Buddhist phrase "dokusho doku-shi," meaning "we are born alone, and we die alone." The exhibition brings together three video installations—*DOKU the Self* (2022), *DOKU the Flow* (2024), and *DOKU the Creator* (2025)—where a darker inquiry into the meaning of life lies behind the avatar's flamboyant costumes, funky dance moves, and funny facial expressions.

Viewers follow DOKU, modelled after the artist's own body and face, through imaginary and cinematic landscapes that remix the aesthetics of ancient mythologies, temple architecture, science fiction, video games, Japanese anime, and immersive 3D environments. DOKU emerges within these universes as an immortal, quasi-divine icon positioned at the nexus of digital spirituality. Yang references samsara in the exhibition's title as an executable program for the cycle of rebirth in the material world, defined by aimless wandering. In Buddhist terms, nirvana, the end of this cycle—which represents spiritual aspiration toward wisdom, freedom, and happiness—seems perpetually out of reach for DOKU. Guided by the Wheel of Life in the video works, DOKU travels

the six realms of samsara in Buddhist cosmology: gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Identity functions here like character selection; gender, appearance, costumes, and personality operate as adjustable parameters without fixed traits. In one scene in *DOKU the Flow*, DOKU walks through a valley strewn with piles of skeletons as eagles circle overhead, hinting at innumerable deaths and reincarnations. The insignificance of a single being in the vast landscape provokes a profound sense of solitude in the process of infinite becoming. If everything is impermanent and death offers no finality, Yang asks, what are we searching for in our lifetime?

At Amant, the large video screen looping *DOKU the Self* and *DOKU the Flow* is surrounded by *Galsang Aspiration Prayer* (Dzogchen Pema Tashi Rinpoche) (2024), a series of seven hanging calligraphy scrolls. The prayer, "May I become a refuge and guide for all sentient beings [...] a friend to

the lonely, a helper to the helpless," initially appears to stand in contrast to DOKU's solitary journey. Extending beyond the screen, the prayers address visitors directly, serving as a spiritual accompaniment that brings DOKU's spirit from the virtual to the physical world. Their monumental scale, together with the reflective silver mylar lining the walls and floor, transforms the installation into a space of blessing and protection to those who travel alone.

The motif of a cairn-like stone pile recurs within the video works, as well as physically inside the gallery and in the outside garden. In *DOKU the Flow*, a near-death experience at the shore amid rain and crashing waves prompts the avatar to converse with a stone pile, which narrates its countless past lives through a dialogue box on-screen and expresses exhaustion and isolation, reflecting DOKU's own enduring cycles. In the gallery, functioning as navigational markers, these stone piles serve as memento mori, decla-



Lu Yang, installation view from "DOKU! DOKU! DOKU!: samsara.exe," 2025, Amant, New York City
 PHOTO: NEW DOCUMENT; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND AMANT