

Taipei Biennial 2020: Curatorial Concept

“You and I don’t live on the same planet”— New Diplomatic Encounters

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“You and I don’t share the same vision of the world” is a frequent figure of speech in political debates, whether in an official or informal setting. But the point is that today it is not merely a difference of “visions” about a space that would be the same for everyone, but a question of “the material nature” of the very world that we are talking about. Whereas in earlier times, geopolitics implied that there were different people with different interests fighting for territories that were parts of the same nature, today it is the composition of this very nature that is at stake.

It does not take much time to realize how divided the different people of the Earth are as to what is the exact nature of their planet. It is clear, for instance, that Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg don’t live on the same planet! In the world imagined by Donald Trump, CO₂ emissions are not an existing threat to the environment, greenhouse emissions are a mere belief, and business as usual must go on with American interests at its center. Obviously, those who support such a view don’t live on the same land as those who are suffering from a deep ecological crisis.

As for those who still lived with the ideal of Modernity, they were heading towards a land that fostered development, efficiency and wealth, but the problem is that it turned out they led us towards a space that does not really exist. According to some estimates, it would take five earths if we were all to live the “American way of life”. We now understand that the “global” has become an unattainable ideal. In addition, such a globalizing drive has increased inequalities by immensely benefiting the people who are integrated within this international circuit of exchange while creating a multitude of people who consider themselves as having been left behind by globalisation (the so called “outsiders”). There is obviously an increasing gap between the ideal of the global and the reality of planet Earth.

This disparity and its troubling consequences are so great that for some immensely wealthy people, there is a deep-seated urge to get off the planet altogether and to colonise Mars instead! But this is not a solution that can be shared with the billions of people left behind.

And to make matters worse, those who are left behind feel betrayed by the global ideal and are heading toward another vision of their land. It has been in the news every morning, especially after election day in Brazil, the United States, Hungary, England, France, and Italy. The general drive is to settle inside the nation states, escaping all the constraints of globalisation. The dream of those people is to remain behind walls and thereby retain at least a central element of the former modernisation project: protection and identity. Here is a planet with a dark magnetic pull, one that could best be named the planet *populism*.

At the same time, other people, everywhere, are becoming aware of the earthly conditions of living in a space that is finite, sensitive, fragile, limited. They are desperately trying to fit various projects of development inside the contours of what we are learning from the sciences of the living Earth. Those people are trying to reconcile the civilising project with the material constraints of what the Earth System can afford. They are looking for another definition of the Earth, one that can be called the *terrestrial*.

Thus, we see different definitions of what the common world looks like! And there are probably many others. There is no way to hide the fact that we are all deeply divided on questions about ecology. Thus it is fair to portray the present political situation not only as a clash of visions but also as a clash about what the earth is really made of. What was a mere figure of speech is now literal. No wonder that it has become so difficult to search for a common ground; there seems to be no *common ground* at all.

One way to frame the conflicts inside the exhibition is to consider that there is an increasing gap between the land necessary for our subsistence and prosperity on the one hand, and the territory that we recognize as our legal and affective abode, on the other. The lack of agreement between the two meanings of land is well illustrated by the constantly receding date of Earth Overshoot Day, which identifies the moment in any given year when humans have eaten up their natural capital and have begun accumulating debt against the Earth (in 2018 in France, the date was May 5; in South Korea, April 16; in China, June 15¹).

Talking about this gap between the source of prosperity and the reality of our legal and affective framework necessarily implies becoming aware of the material conditions that we depend upon to subsist, conditions which the project of modernization has constantly ignored, evaded or even denied. This implies a deep shift in what we consider to be a land or

¹ <https://www.overshootday.org/steps-to-move-the-date/#/p/1116570299581919233>

a territory. In our view, a land is not just a chunk of space on a map but the *list of all the elements*, no matter how remote, which are necessary for any living being to subsist. The challenge for us is to render such a list visible so that visitors become finally able to *reconcile* the real lands they live on with the one they like to dream about.

In sum, reconciling the two conceptions of land and territory amounts to transforming what was formerly framed as a set of ecological questions into a new set of more urgent and more tragic *political* struggles. Where to land? On what planet are we living? These are the questions we wish to continue exploring through the Biennale; they are central to what we are calling a “new climatic regime”.

By framing the question in such a geopolitical way, we hope to trigger what we call “new diplomatic encounters”. Diplomacy defines a set of skills, procedures, and habits of thought which occur either *before* or *after* a situation of conflict. The key feature of a diplomatic encounter is that there is no arbiter, referee, or judge who would sit above the situation to decide who is right or wrong about an issue. It is precisely because *there is no such a judge* that diplomacy is necessary. In the fictional space of the exhibition, we wish to multiply those encounters to mimic what would be needed in the real world, at scale one, and thus to prepare the visitors for the tasks that lie ahead.

If diplomacy is needed right now, it is because the dreams of a generally accepted common ground have disappeared with the emergence of this new climatic regime. To be sure, universality had been under attack for many years and from many quarters. It has been shown to be a cover for the land grab by certain nation states of the territories of others in the name of values which we now realize are no longer generally accepted. But such a critique of universality happens just at the time when the ecological crisis obliges all peoples to reassess what is dividing them to the core but also what they might have in common nonetheless. So it seems that one way to search for a “weak” and “wicked” form of universality is to devise diplomatic exercises.

Since it is impossible to tackle the geopolitical conflicts head on, we hope to turn to the TFAM to create a “scale model” of the situation as a way to help the visitors define their own perspective on the planet they want to inhabit. What better place than an exhibition space since it is precisely *about space* that we are so deeply divided? Especially since the island of Taiwan, because of its peculiar geological and geopolitical situation, can itself be

taken as a summary of the problems encountered by the whole Earth. Taiwan sits exactly at the intersection between the older definition of nation-states sovereignty and new forms of sovereignty to be imposed by the new climatic regime. Because of this, the notion of “diplomatic encounters” takes on a very peculiar salience: half ecological, half political. On this island, all the demographic, geopolitical, geological, and ecological questions are gathered together in a most dramatic form, creating a rich milieu of artists, activists, engineers, scientists and citizens to provide answers to this exceptional situation.

It is this milieu that we wish to benefit from by working with artists, scientists and architects to try providing a texture and a representation of those lands that one wants to inhabit. “You and I” indicates a form of confrontation and division, but hopefully a productive one, which we want to examine in particular during our workshop program through the simulation of those diplomatic encounters.

The 2018 edition of the Taipei Biennale, “Post Nature”, took the museum as an ecosystem, allowed the exploration of the entanglement of humans and non-humans and thereby an exploration of the process of decolonization of the former by the latter. For this 2020 edition, we want to investigate these issues further by looking at the implications of the 2018 event in order to explore the current divergences and to try imagining and shaping what could be the direction toward a “terrestrial” mode of existence.