

Leora Joy Jones

A Conversation with Martin Guinard: 2020 Taipei Biennial

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The Taipei Biennial is one of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum's (TFAM) most important exhibitions and has been held every two years since 1998 with an aim to build connections



Left to right: Martin Guinard, Bruno Latour.

between local art communities in Taiwan and global contemporary artists. In the 2008 Biennial, curators Manray Hsu and Vasif Kortun investigated “resistance movements . . . ecological breakdown . . . and opportunities for change.”¹ In 2014, Nicolas Bourriaud also explored how human activity has transformed the planet. For the most recent Biennial, in 2018, Mali Wu and Francesco Manacorda expanded on the pressing climate crisis issue by framing the museum as an ecosystem interlinked with a myriad of other systems, exploring the entanglement of humans and non-humans. Many of the participants in 2018 were non-conventional artists: scientists, filmmakers, and environmental activists, and alliances who were presented alongside protest groups, architects, urban planners, and sociologists, exemplifying the intertwining of politics, economics, and the environment.

The American feminist theorist Donna Haraway wrote that the concept of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch that emerged as a result of mankind's actions—is so pressing that we need a new word to describe how human activity has literally been “written into the rocks,”² and she suggests the term “Capitalocene,” as it points directly to humanity's voracious appetite for constant economic growth. For this year's Biennial (24 October 24, 2020–February 28, 2021), you, along with French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour, will carry forward with this theme, building upon the last Biennial. The fact that it is repeatedly addressing these issues I find commendable. But this also means you are presented with a difficult task, to frame this issue anew while keeping it relevant to local and international audiences. Can you expand a little on how you envision this 2020 Taipei Biennial as either a continuity of previous editions or a divergence from how the Anthropocene has been addressed in the past?

Martin Guinard: When Ralph Rugoff curated the 13th Lyon Biennale in 2015, he likened it to a pendulum as it occurs every two years. Biennials

also record the contradictions of their time. One of the key issues of the current situation we live in is not only the great acceleration of carbon dioxide levels, but also the acceleration of other phenomena such as erosion, extinction rates, and so on. In this time of acceleration, wouldn't it be great if the pendulum could pause for a bit so we can take the time to dig deeper into these issues rather than passing quickly on to the next crisis? Bruno and I are not trying to reinvent the biennial and part of the problem of biennial fatigue is the myth of "the fresh and the new." Of course, there is a need for originality in statements as well as programming but digging deeper is more interesting to us than jumping to the next topic. This is why we are working in continuity with the former edition. We are in close touch with Mali Wu and Francesco Manacorda who curated the previous edition of the Taipei Biennial. Mali Wu has been very generous with her assistance, and from what we understand, both curators are pleased that this question of the ecosystem can continue to be addressed, as it's also an extension of their concept. We are not going to pretend that in the year and a half we have to prepare for this exhibition that we can even do a quarter of the research in Taiwan that Mali Wu has done for the last forty years, so we have been working together to address what still needs to be done, and what projects can be continued.

Of course, there is a need for a "twist." The main twist here is that most shows about the Anthropocene usually propose a new way in which some humans have impacted the Earth-system. If you think about it, so many approaches toward the ecology have been along the lines of "we" should all unify to save the "house" that belongs to "us." But "we" are not unified by ecology—there are actually many divisions and this is especially striking now. Think of the 2019 G7 Summit in France. All the world leaders are sitting in a circle, and there's an empty chair where Trump should be seated. It's a very striking image because it reveals that he decided that climate change and carbon dioxide omissions don't affect "his" planet. Bruno wants to emphasize that we don't just have different points of view; we have different ways of shaping the materiality of the world. Our proposition is that instead of focusing on what ought to be unified, let us accept these divisions, and bring together a diverse range of people to discuss them with each other, especially if there are opposing points of view. Diplomacy is not war though! There's a very important nuance to that difference. Diplomacy stops the moment you enter into war. We envision the 2020 Taipei Biennial as a platform for these kinds of encounters.

Leora Joy Jones: Do you think of diplomacy as a kind of translation between parties, bodies, or entities?

Martin Guinard: That's an excellent way of discussing it, knowing that translation implies transformation; if you translate, you are not only going to find something equivalent, you are also going to transform from one entity to another. There is a fundamental shift in the act of translation, so the idea of diplomacy is about getting this translation going, in a conceptual sense.

Leora Joy Jones: In a public lecture that Bruno Latour gave in Taipei in September 2019, he framed this current crisis as “the house we live in is not the land we live from,” referring to how many countries overuse the world’s resources, living and working in removed climate-controlled spaces separate from the elements and from their effects on the planet. Very few large-scale global exhibitions have managed to address the climate crisis and issues of the Anthropocene without themselves contributing to the problem—through flights, large-scale printing and publication, the building of false walls, lights and air conditioning, the commissioning of works, and resource management. Since this is the fourth iteration of a show centred on ecological issues and society’s impact on this planet, how do you think the Taipei Biennial and TFAM can better offset its carbon footprint in a way that is not merely gestural?

Martin Guinard: Ah, this is the question you asked at the public lecture. You asked if we will address our own carbon footprint. We are trying to build up a carbon sink in collaboration with environmental engineers and local NGOs. A carbon sink works to bring carbon dioxide into the ground, plants, and trees rather than leaving it in the atmosphere. When I started to work as a curator on the issue of the climate five years ago I thought, isn’t that ironic, now I take the plane a lot, whereas I didn’t take it all that much before. But I got really tired of this ironic joke. As a result, we are commissioning Stéphane Verlet Bottéro, an environmental engineer and artist who worked in a carbon offset program called Ecosur Afrique, to help us set up a carbon sink. The specifics are being discussed now.

For the 2020 Taipei Biennial we could offset our carbon emissions by buying a patch of forest in Kenya, but then there are lots of issues with doing this. Who are we to use this land instead of local farmers? It is more interesting to do something that has particular meaning for Taiwan. We are in discussion with some scientists and other local institutions to see how this can best be done. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not a greenwashing strategy to feel good about ourselves. What we want to propose is an offset program, which will hopefully be an approximate equivalent to the amount of carbon dioxide created by the biennial. But this is not a linear process, and we want to be reflexive while doing this.

Leora Joy Jones: One project in the 2018 Taipei Biennial, *Museum in the Clouds* by Huai-Wen Chang and MAS [Micro Architecture Studio], initiated that line of inquiry. They had a weather station on the roof that assessed “temperature, heat radiation, ultraviolet light, wind flow velocity, wind direction, and rainfall”³ so that improvements can be made to the museum.

Martin Guinard: That work used the museum as a sensor to gauge how polluted it is, which is a strong step in the right direction. We can take it one step further by asking why we are responsible for this pollution and who suffers from it. The question of responsibility and agency is very different when you move from a vulnerable position to the one who is instigating or



Huai-Wen CHANG, *Museum in the Clouds*, 2018, steel, membrane, weather station, water fog system, LED, 400 x 120 x 600 cm. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

causing the problem. Again, the point is not to greenwash but to dig into these complexities while taking action.

Leora Joy Jones: Have you heard of the search engine called Ecosia? They plant trees around the world for every search you make. Perhaps, if TFAM initiated small changes like that, it would be indicative of this larger shift, especially as 2020 is not the first edition of the Taipei Biennial that addresses the Anthropocene.

Martin Guinard: Asking the museum to think about that is a part of the process actually. Do we measure just the cost of flying artists to the Biennial, and all the journalists coming from abroad, the materials being sourced, or do we start to add in all the visitors who take their cars to the museum? How do you begin to calculate our carbon emissions? These are fascinating questions to explore and to ensure we go beyond a merely symbolic gesture.

Leora Joy Jones: Does this integrate with the idea of using TFAM as a scale model for the world we live in? In the last edition, the museum was framed as an ecosystem. Is a scale model a different iteration of that kind of thinking process?

Martin Guinard: Yes, this is a productive way of thinking about it. The idea of a scale model is that you are in a concentrated space, so you can address these big issues when you enter a limited space such as the museum. You can focus on it intensively, knowing that of course there are always going to be parameters that will not be included. We may be criticized for this, but it's healthy and normal, it's a way to improve the reflection process.

I'll take a detour here to illustrate this idea of a scale model. The Taiwanese artist Chang Yung-Ta and I travelled with a team of scientists to Taroko

Gorge near Hualien, Taiwan, in October 2019. We were shown small parts of the riverbed. So, you're in this massive river bed, and you have small pools with a bit of water flowing on the side, like a miniature gorge. We were told there is a big debate for these scientists as some situations can be successfully scaled down in the laboratory without losing the important factors. Some elements that affect this massive gorge could be observed in this tiny pool of water. For example, the rocks and sand that get moved through the river are proportionate to a huge stone that is shifted during a typhoon. On the other hand, some processes cannot be scaled down—water has a different viscosity or speed when it is in a large or a small quantity, so we cannot properly assess it in a small model like this.

Leora Joy Jones: Can you expand on the importance of this project at Taroko Gorge and the idea of the critical zones that it represents?

Martin Guinard: The idea of a globe is not a satisfying way to represent Earth. Don't get me wrong, we are not advocating for the flat earth theory. [Laughs] But with critical zones, scientists are studying only the upper skin of the earth, and that is very different to studying the globe as a whole, which is about 12.7 thousand kilometres in diameter. A critical zone is an interface for where life as we know it is happening, and folded within that very small space is an alternative way to question ecology. In the beginning, the study of ecology was focused on the interactions between minerals and the atmosphere but with time, more focus was placed on living organisms rather than with interactions underground, or with the atmosphere. But these underfoot and overhead interactions sustain ecosystems.

The other vital point is that we don't even have knowledge about the entire critical zone. So there are specific localized observatories, and one important one is in Taroko Gorge. According to Niels Hovius, Head of the Geomorphology Section at GFZ German Research Centre for Geosciences, Taroko Gorge is fascinating because phenomena such as erosion or earthquakes or typhoons are heightened here, so a critical zone is a good alternative to the general notion of nature, because it's a hybrid space, which we have been folded into and impacted. Hovius is interested in how an artist such as Chang Yung-Ta, who has experience working with these kinds of data sets, can use the data that has been collected. We have organized a residency for this artist to collaborate with the lab in Taroko Gorge, and this collaboration is at the heart of this extraordinary dynamic international process. He has a sensitive way of making the invisible visible. Hovius and his team are excited about this project which does more than merely illustrate the issue of critical zones, he will see what it means and ask how it is highly related to human conditions of existence. This collaboration expands our comprehension of this issue by using a different language, one that comes out of the visual arts. We are focusing on funding works with a strong interaction with Taiwan.

Leora Joy Jones: Your research at ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany, will culminate in the exhibition *Critical Zones, Observatory for Earthly Politics*, curated by

Taroko Gorge, Taiwan. Photo: Martin Guinard.



Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, Bettina Korintenberg, and you, a subject you have been working on for three years now. Can you tell me about how this research has influenced your approach to the 2020 Taipei Biennial?

Martin Guinard: In a nutshell, ZKM will exclusively focus on critical zones whereas the Taipei Biennial will explore this issue as well as many others that have a common problematic. In both exhibitions we try to propose a situation that rearticulates the connection between the physical and the social order. Each time the physical order changes, the social order is modified in response. As Bruno reminds us, we can think of the Galileo affair. When people realized that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, they were shocked. Then, a couple of years later, the King of France, Louis the 14th, claimed he was the Sun King to centrally situate himself. He adapted to this social change very quickly and used it to his advantage. The point is that ZKM will focus on one cosmological shift (from the globe to critical zones), whereas Taipei will have a more pluralistic approach.

When I began working with Bruno he told me that to start, we'll have to find works that relate to or illustrate our ideas, but over time, we'll have to change the idea so it relates to the projects and artworks that are being

made. One of the most important lessons I learned when studying art history was to make sure that the theory backs up the art, and that the art doesn't back up the theory.

Leora Joy Jones: I know you met with Patrick Flores recently, just before the launch of the 2019 Singapore Biennial *Every Step in the Right Direction* (November 22, 2019–March 22, 2020), as well as Pierre Huyghe, who also just curated *If the Snake*, the second iteration of the Okayama Art Summit (September 27–November 24, 2019). Can you tell me a little about how the discourse with these curators informed your research?

Martin Guinard: I admire the precision of Patrick Flores. We had an interesting discussion about the “about” of a show. He said he didn't want to make a biennial where the works are “about” something. He wanted people to take the time to really feel what the works have to say. The “about” is often so quickly established that it becomes reductionist. Of course, we are doing a thought experiment (what scientist would do when they want to launch an experiment but cannot prove it in reality, therefore use the power of imagination to achieve it) as an exhibition and there is a statement, so, inevitably, there is a strong conceptual framework. But we have to think of the pace at which we interpret works: some can be read directly, and others will unfold more slowly. We want to allow for contrast between different lines of thought, so that direction needs to be shaped. I look forward to seeing Flores' exhibition. He was very generous in meeting with me.

I was lucky to work with Pierre Huyghe in 2016, what he did at the Okayama Summit is great because he plays with scale in such a fascinating way. Outside the one venue, which was at a school, there were large hills of sand with artworks placed around it. Later on, you walk into a room and you see a glass vitrine with a sand sculpture in it. So, from a distance, you look through a window, and see miniature people walking around this sandpit, and inside the vitrine there are these tiny animals. There is this extraordinary moment where what was not spectacular at first becomes spectacular after some time. I admire his work, and the way he holds onto the spectacular. That's a skill.

Leora Joy Jones: Who is your intended audience?

Martin Guinard: There's a beautiful quote by Jean-François Chévrier (that he got himself from Stéphane Mallarmé, apparently), who said art is for the ones who are willing. Art is not for the church, it is not for the powerful, it is for the ones who are willing to look and be moved. A Latourian way to say it would be that the issues should shape the public. We need to be careful about the drive to multiply the mediations, the texts, the conferences, and the workshops. It's important to have schools and students and scholars come, as well as people from neighbourhoods further away from the museum.

Leora Joy Jones: The Taipei Biennial has had been running for over twenty years and the curatorial models have shifted greatly over this time.

There was a two-curator system that was meant to foster local curators by placing them alongside established international ones. However, it was heavily criticized as local curators were regularly not placed on equal footing to their counterparts. Then there were a few editions led by a single international superstar curator like Anselm Franke and Nicolas Bourriaud. Very few women have led the Taipei Biennial. The 2018 edition marked a radical change. Mali Wu, a local socially engaged artist (with no prior experience in curating), was appointed first. She established the theme and then chose an international co-curator to work with her. 2018 was also only the third year a woman was appointed, and Mali Wu was the second Taiwanese woman to lead the Taipei Biennial.

Bearing this in mind, and without being reductive or too simplistic, there are problematics with two white men from a wealthy country in Europe curating Asia. I know you are conscious of this from previous conversations we have had, and this awareness is reflected in the title: *You and I Do Not Live On the Same Planet*, which indicates the disconnect among regions. I am interested in your thinking on addressing your position as an outsider and a guest, and the translation and encouragement of local discourse and participation.

Martin Guinard: This is an understandable question. We have a strategy that we will announce soon. In the meantime, when we first came to Taiwan, we had an extensive series of workshops and seminars with several scholars, activists, and artists from different fields to prepare what we call “The Theatre of Negotiation.” These professionals tell us what they believe is interesting and relevant to explore in Taiwan. Our hope is that this process can be useful to assist them in their research, notably through the opportunity to experiment in different contexts. They propose ideas for the exhibition, but they also choose the topic of their workshops, not us. We are prepared to listen and learn from this experience.

Notes

1. 2008 Taipei Biennial, <https://www.taipeibiennial.org/2008/TBThemes/Mytheme.aspx?Language=iWtQXTY5yepbYPOReEQvvxIHCRdaRaeW/>.
2. Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhucene,” *Art in The Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, eds. Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 233.
3. “Huai-Wen Chang and MAS [Micro Architecture Studio],” In *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem 2018 Taipei Biennial Guide Book* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018), 84.