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New Ecological Perspectives at the Taipei Biennial



When it comes to ecological concerns, we tend to think that we are all in the same boat.

However, the 2020 Taipei Biennial highlights how the boat we call 'planet earth' can be experienced in very different ways.

To some, we are comfortably cruising the Mediterranean on a Costa Crociere. To others, we are clinging to the wet wood of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (hint: the shipwrecked folks are us).

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In other words, the multiplicity of points of view about the question of our planet's survival does not create consensus. On the contrary, it divides.

Bruno Latour, Martin Guinand and Eva Lin, curators of this edition of the Taipei Biennial, spell it loud and clear: "Take people like Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg; Trump's planet has infinite resources to exploit, Thunberg's is fragile," they note.

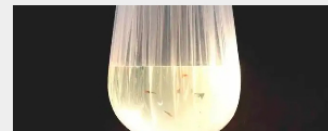
Fittingly, these themes tie into the title of this year's Biennial: "You and I don't live on the same planets".



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Co-curators of the 2020 Taipei Biennial, French philosopher Bruno Latour (right) and curator Martin Guinard (left) (Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum)



Eva Lin, curator of public programs of the 2020 Taipei Biennial

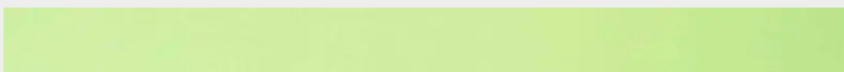
The curators see this polarisation of viewpoints as something that can help to clarify the situation in which we find ourselves.

"For ecology is not just one of many themes – it is very likely to organize the whole political discussion," they note.

Latour and Guinard point out that environmental concerns will divide future generations, who will be more affected than the present ones: "It already divides internally, each person who would like to be more ecological, in (their) daily actions, even (in) something as simple as choosing between a vegetarian option and meat."

By observing the work of artists from all latitudes at the Biennial, we can see how the ecological question divides geographically. The show presents artists who are in regions affected by environmental change alongside those who hail from places which are more preserved. Southeast Asia for example, offers many examples of traditional practices which evidence sustainability on a micro-level, while also being the home of mega-cities that display no ecological consciousness whatsoever.

We turned the questions of how the themes of the Taipei Biennial apply to the region, to curators Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard, Eva Lin, and Taipei Museum director Ping Lin.



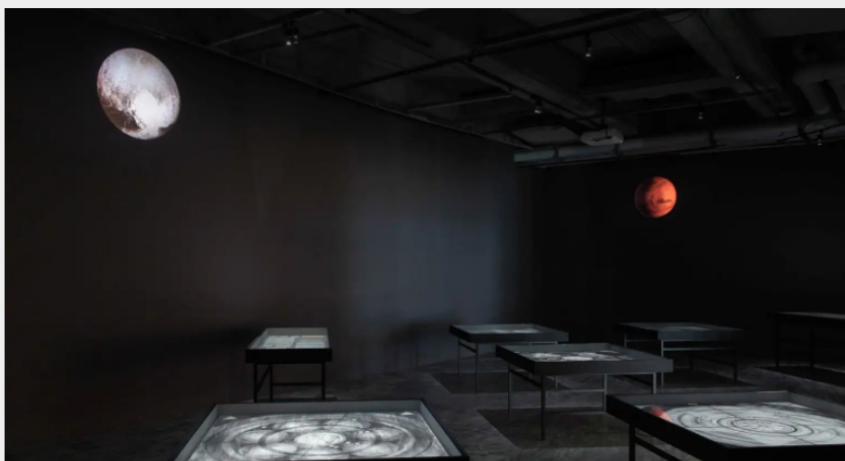


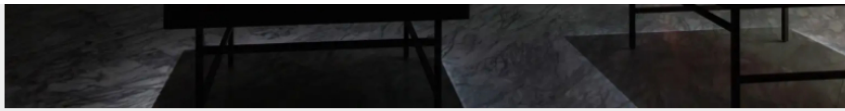
Ping Lin, Director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum)

The conceptual focus of the Biennale is on native philosophies, which differ from contemporary mainstream logic, and can represent perhaps the key towards saving our planet. How do these kinds of discussions articulate in Biennial's public programs?

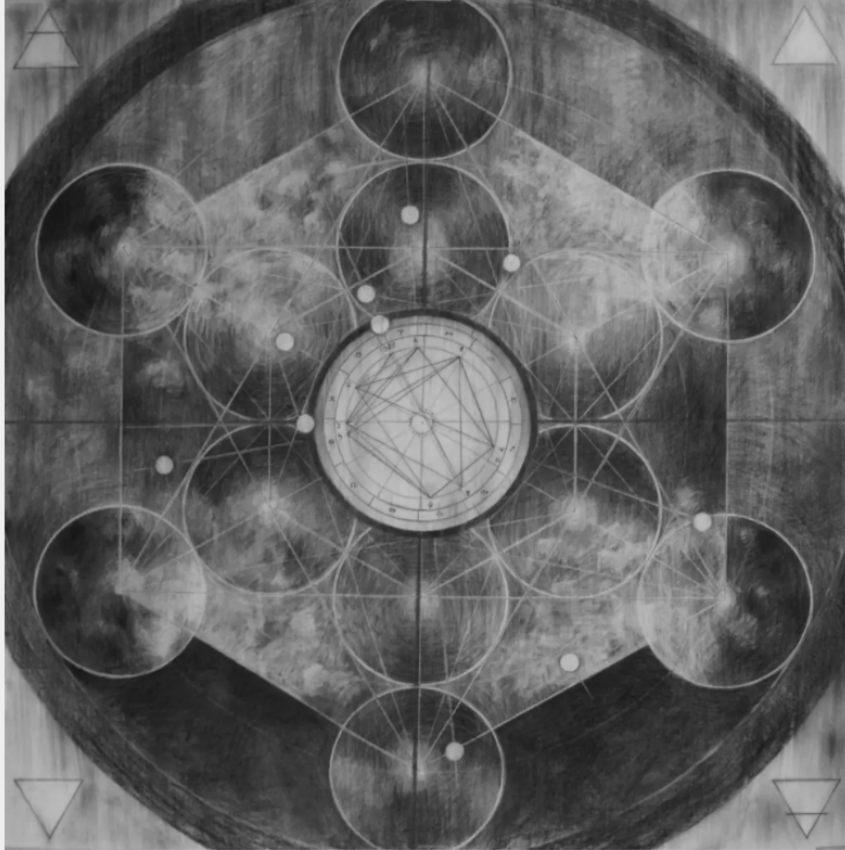
Eva Lin: The public programmes transform an art space into fieldwork, in response to local conditions and the impetus of knowledge. We anticipate re-establishing relations with all the living creatures of the land, an opportunity for open and mutual exchange and learning. The programs include both lectures and hands-on workshops spanning numerous disciplines, such as writing science fiction, air quality monitoring performance, critical reading, and the inspection of historical materials.

Meanwhile, we lead the public out of the museum and into the field, using bodily perceptions to depict spaces that traverse the boundaries of maps. The audience will follow the indigenous sages, hunters, artists, and scientists to use their bodies to perceive the environment and learn the land ethics and natural philosophy in mountain and forest.





Chen Yin-Ju, *Liquidation Maps*, 2014, 5 charcoal and pencil drawings on paper (each 125×126 cm), printed documents, study notes, HD videos in a loop (source: NASA), dimension variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Chen's work is a collection of drawings are astrological charts, showing the configurations of the stars at the beginning of 5 very specific dates in recent Asian history: the massacres in East Timor in 1999, the Lieyu Massacre in 1987 (Taiwan), the Sook Ching Massacres in 1942 (Singapore), the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975 (Cambodia), and the Gwangju Uprising in 1980 (South Korea). By linking these tragic events to astrological dispositions, the artist poses the question of what animates history. Were these dramas predetermined and therefore inevitable?



Chen Yin-Ju, drawing of *Liquidation Maps (Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia)*, 2014, charcoal and pencil on paper, 125×126 cm. Collection of Katy Hsiu Chih Chien.

You consider Taiwan as a sort of microcosm of the whole Earth in both geological and geopolitical terms. Could you expand on this idea?

Bruno Latour & Martin Guinand: Taiwan is an interesting place as it is at the intersection of geopolitical and geological "tensions". Geopolitical because of its relationship with its neighbour, and geological, as one of the places where typhoons, landslides, and other phenomena make it one of the most eroded places on earth. This is interesting because now that the activity of some humans is impacting the earth's system as a whole, geology will play (more of an) active role in geopolitics.

Indeed, we are in a situation where humans create perturbation on the climate (as much) as other geological forces such as volcanos or the movement of tectonic plates. This theme has been vastly explored in many art exhibitions (notably the 2014 Taipei Biennial). What interests us is the intersection of the new "geo-political" framework which results from this situation.





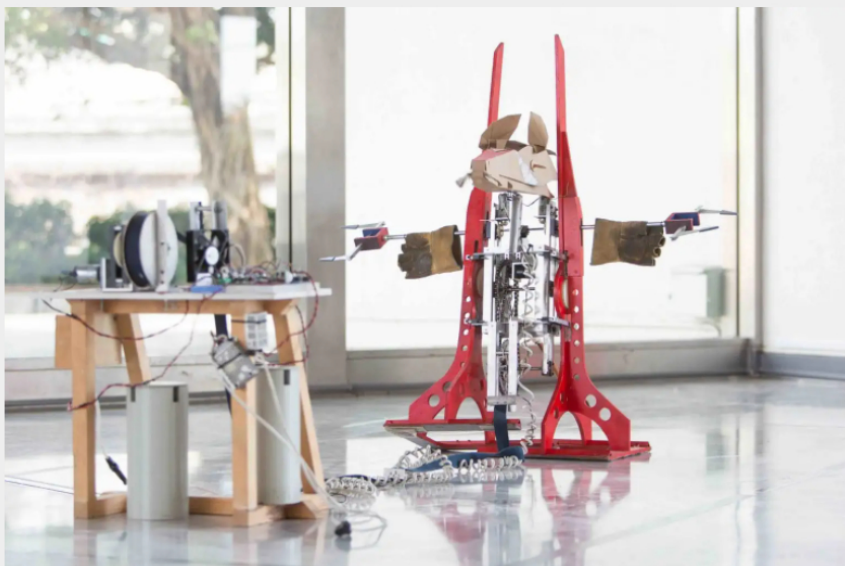
Chang Yung-Ta, *scape.unseen_model-T*, 2020, installation, dimensions variable. (Image courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum.) Chang's work addresses the earth's Critical Zone – its 'skin' or thin layer, where water, soil, plants, rocks, weather, or animal life interact together to create the conditions necessary for life as we know it. As it would not be possible to study the whole Critical Zone, scientists gather sets of instruments at specific observatories, such as the Taroko Gorge in the center of Taiwan, which was chosen because the geographic dynamics such as earthquake, landslide, erosion, and weathering are particularly active there. Once these processes are measured, the collected data are analyzed in labs overseas. Chang's installation spreads over two floors to remind viewers that the Critical Zone is above their heads and under their feet.

We simultaneously witness a division amongst those who seem to have abandoned planet earth, those who try to make it more inhabitable, and those whose cosmology never fitted within the ideals of globalisation in the first place. As curators how do you convey all these different points of view?

Bruno Latour & Martin Guinand: We invited artists who allow us to explore different perspectives on the topic. Let's take two contrasting examples. Fernando Palma, who is part of the Nahua community in Mexico, explores what it means to consider his sculptures as "personas". For him surrounding objects, landscape etc... are not objects without volition, they are alive, and from this logic, non-humans also deserve a certain sense of care and respect.



Fernando Palma Rodríguez, *Quetzalcóatl*, 2006, corn husk, software, hardware, mixed media dimensions, dimensions variable. (Image courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum) The artist's works are "like strange robotic creatures, moving in several directions through the entrance hall. Each of them is a chimera of electrical, building material and Nahua figures (a cultural group also called Aztecs)." From the Nahua perspective, humans are not the only ones to have a persona – a 'persona' is simply defined as "somebody who you can have a conversation with, the opposite of an inert object that would be out of volition.."



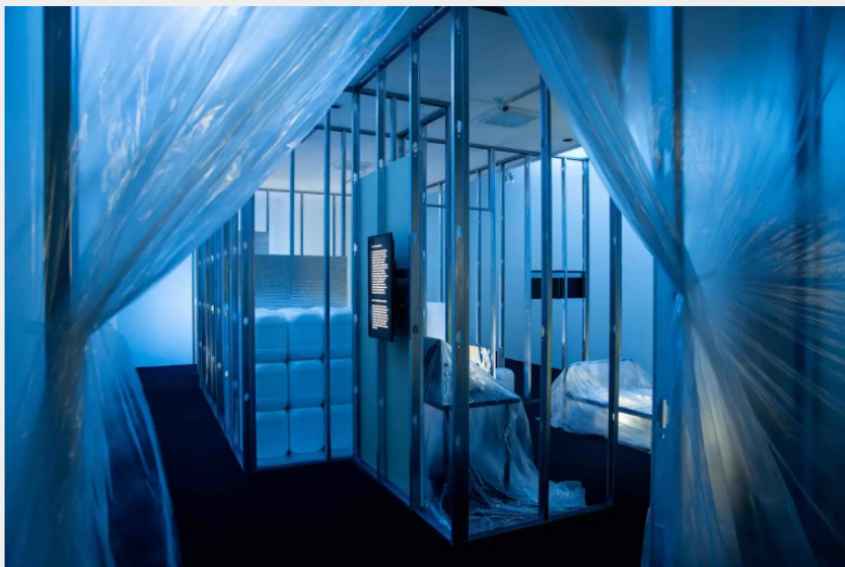
Fernando Palma Rodríguez *Soldado (red)*, 2001, wooden structure, electronic circuits, sensors and software, dimensions variable. (Image courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum) According to the artist, it is the ability of communication, whether it is chemical or genetic, that allows for the condition of possible friendship, not only with other human beings but with one's surroundings. In Palma's view, these creatures are alive. Electricity is not so much an

objective phenomenon as the vital force that allows the work to flow, and hence become a 'person' in its own right.

This is a very different approach than the one of Femke Herregraven who is fascinated by the bunkers built by the super-rich in case of the apocalypse:



Femke Herregraven, *Corrupted Air –Act VI*, 2019, mixed media installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum. This work is a survivalist bunker that explores the imaginary of the “panic room” in case of catastrophe. As the glass doors of the room of the installation open, the visitor notices that the space remains uninhabited, except for three strange creatures: the avatars of an extinct elephant bird, trilobite, and lizard. They come back to “life” thanks to highly precise scanned digital models and they engage in a discussion based on a scenario written by the artist.



As the creatures wait for an end that does not come, they indulge in existential heart to heart reflections: “You can only die twice. First when you stop breathing and second when somebody says your name for the last time.” (Image courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum)

If Palma works on ways to develop the connection between himself and his surrounding environment, Herregraven explores the imaginary of the ultimate disconnection, the escape from the surface of the planet Earth.

Does the uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic make you approach curation differently?

Bruno Latour & Martin Guinard: It did for sure. But we had the luck to get nominated before the pandemic started and Taiwan handled the situation really well as you know. We were able to organize some research trips in Taipei (in 2019), which were very useful.

One of the points which is a disappointment is that one of the curators –Martin Guinard– was supposed to travel to Southeast Asia in January 2020 for several weeks. When the pandemic started those trips were aborted and many encounters could not occur. So we were unable to fully develop most of the projects in the end and therefore did not present as many artists from the region as we had expected.

Are there any Southeast Asian works and artists at the 2020 Taipei Biennale? And if so, how they are presented in relation to other works?

Bruno Latour & Martin Guinard: An interesting example is the work of Nathalie Muchamad who is an Indonesian and New Caledonian artist and explores cultural and historical connections between Southeast Asia and Africa with a collective called the School of Mutants. Their project explores the history of a utopian

and Africa with a collective called the School of Mutants. Their project explores the history of a decolonial education project in Senegal in the 1990s which aimed at creating an elite university in Dakar and – was funded in part by Taiwan.


The project was never realized, due to various issues. But the collective of artists (Hamédine Khan, Stéphane Verlet Bottéro, Lou Mo, Olivia Anani, and Nathalie Muchamad) realized a set of research on the history of this project, as well as a multimedia installation addressing these questions of futurity and exchange between Africa and South-East Asia. In this context, Muchamad creates fabrics that feature visual patterns related to pan-Africanism and the non-aligned movement (i.e. the countries which refused to align with the USSR or the US during the cold war).



Hamedine Kane, Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro, and Nathalie Muchamad with Olivia Anani and Lou Mo, still image from *The School of Mutants*, 2020, HD video, 11 mins 38 secs The video work was made during the lockdown period in Dakar. The artists are seen building a DIY radio station that picks up a fictional interview between two protagonists about a speculative future where the ruins of the quarantined city have become the stage of a revolutionary becoming. Abandoned public university projects in Taiwan were also filmed and added to this scenery, evoking the decaying legacy of Afro-Asianism. (Image courtesy of the Taipei Biennial 2020)

In terms of audiences, how does the Taipei Biennial situate itself in the Asian art ecosystem?

Ping Lin: Biennials are platforms of knowledge production through art, dealing with the most critical issues of the time while looking forward into the future with a vision. Countries in Asia have gone through similar processes of “modernisation”, and we are now keen to free ourselves from Western frameworks of knowledge and to create platforms to rebuild our own identities. As one of the first contemporary art biennials in Asia, the Taipei Biennial attempts to foster global dialogues between Taiwan and other cultures, promote local perspectives, and enhance cultural value exchanges.



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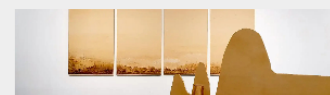
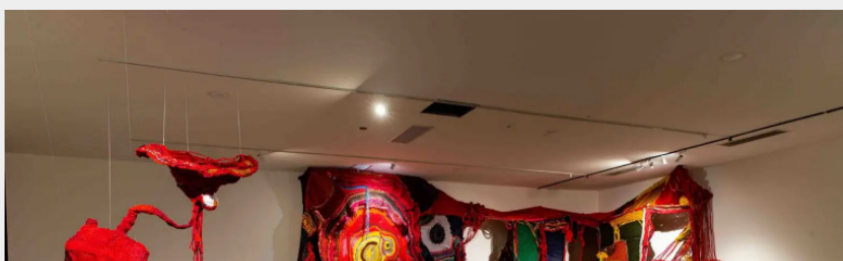
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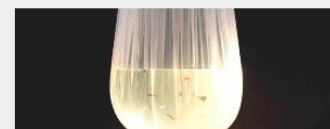
How does Taiwan specifically view itself in relation to Southeast Asia?

Eva Lin: Although Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries have different languages, religions, and histories, there are similarities in the processes of colonization, decolonization, and then democratization. In the last decade, artistic exchanges between Taiwan and Southeast Asia have increased dramatically, and Taiwan’s demographic structure and social landscape have changed rapidly with the influx of new immigrants. The mother cultures brought by new immigrants from Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, are unique and irreplaceable in the construction of contemporary culture and artistic creation in Taiwan.

The Southeast Asian art community is unique in its collective creation, interdisciplinary social practices, and flexible forms of creation, which also bring more dialogue to the contemporary art community in Taiwan, and the art exchange between the two sides extends from contemporary art to craft, cultural research, and even community construction, resulting in an accumulation of cross-site exhibitions, events, and writings. In a way, the contemporary art scene in Taiwan in recent years has paid more attention to a certain kind of “Southern Perspective” not only in response to the government’s southbound policy but also as a necessary way to understand Taiwan itself.



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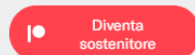
(Right) Aruwai Kaumakan, *Vines in the Mountains*, 2020, wool, ramie, cotton, copper, silk, glass beads, dimensions variable.
(Left) Aruwai Kaumakan, *The Axis of Life*, 2018, recycled fabric, cotton, organic cotton, 500×120×100 cm. (Both images courtesy of the Artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum). The artist hails from a Paiwan tribe in southern Taiwan and creates sculptures using "Lemikalik"—a Paiwan technique that consists of "weaving in concentric circles—intertwining memories of tribal nobility to form a place for constant conversation and connection." While her practice is inspired by her tradition it also responds to current issues faced by her and her tribe, for example, when her village was hit by a violent typhoon in 2009, forcing them to relocate.

What would be the most important takeaway for a Southeast Asian art lover visiting the show?

Bruno Latour & Martin Guinand: The idea that ecology is not going to be a topic between many others but that it is likely to frame political discussions entirely. With land, air, water degradation, it will (only serve to) enhance inequalities.

The 2020 Taipei Biennial runs until 14 March 2021. More details can be found [here](#).

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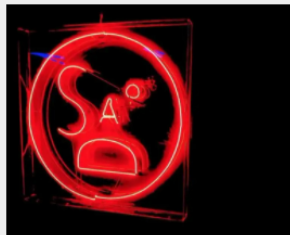
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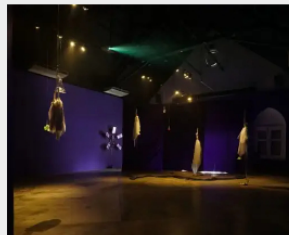
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