

# Decolonising Nature: The Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12

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*The Taipei Biennial 2018 ‘Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem’ and Manifesta 12 ‘The Planetary Garden – Cultivating Coexistence’ provided two divergent responses to the ecological crisis. Like many exhibitions that examine our vulnerable planet, these two recurring shows – one housed in a single museum in Asia and the other sprawled across the Italian city of Palermo in Europe – challenged normative beliefs about humanity’s dominant relationship with nature and reframed our species’ role in ecological destruction. The peripatetic Manifesta 12 framed Palermo as a garden, while the Taipei Biennial 2018 situated the Taipei Fine Arts Museum as an ecosystem. Despite the differing scales and locations of their settings, both shows advocated for the decolonisation of nature and the intimate coexistence, collaboration and interdependence of all species. This essay details how certain artworks in these two biennials make radical propositions that counter and critique contemporary capitalist society, by proposing alternative routes into the future and embracing contaminated diversity and coexistence.*

Staying alive — for every species — requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die... If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it’s time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices (Tsing 2015, 28–34)

Under towering ferns, three naked men walk through the dense, damp forests of Taiwan. Their bare feet step over mossy rocks as they make their way deeper into the undergrowth. The rasping calls of cicadas and other insects serve as the only soundtrack to this slow-paced film. A man languidly reaches above his head to pull a frond down toward his body. He begins to lick the plant. Both hands bring the delicate leaves to his open mouth. The camera holds the scene a little too long. His eyes are shut, his tongue protruding. His back is to us. It arches. A pale creature consumed by a landscape of green. In another scene — this time a close up — a man forcibly bites and rips at a plant, guttural noises escaping his lips as he mangles the fern with his teeth, as he is overcome with lust. This is *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 1], an eco-queer film by Zheng Bo, in which he collaborates with Taiwanese BDSM practitioners who venture into the forests of Taiwan to press their sleek bodies close to ferns and other plants, to both expand on and provocatively query (and queer) our understanding of human-nature relationships.

Why is it considered morally appropriate to consume plants but not to copulate with them? Discussing this evocative open-call proposal for radical interspecies love and inclusive change, Bo says, “only when we extend our imagination can we learn to appreciate the complex existence of all living things... [and] learn to live more intelligently on this planet.”<sup>1</sup> Bo’s call for livable collaborations echoes the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s request in the quote above, for humanity to embrace contaminated diversity in our search for coexistence. This series of films was exhibited at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 (Taiwan) and Manifesta 12 (Italy) as it’s intimacy and sensuality exemplify ideas that counter conventional understandings of humanity’s domination over nature, critiquing the way the planet has been colonised.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a heightened awareness of art’s role in raising public awareness of the accelerating ecological crisis. This has coincided with an increase in international exhibitions on art and the climate crisis, as well as a growing recognition of art’s potential to open up new horizons for different ways of living and enacting change in the

Anthropocene – the name given to the current geological age defined by humankind’s actions. A number of key exhibitions<sup>2</sup> have provided conceptual, cultural, and community-led responses to our vulnerable planet, emphasising the limitations of our current systems, as well as the threats posed by the climate crisis. Ecological artistic practices and exhibitions propose radical ways to reframe society’s approach to the environment, and as such, have the potential to challenge prevailing normative beliefs that separate humans from nature.



Figure 1. Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 2*, 2018. Single Channel Video, 4K Color Sound, 20 mins. Zheng Bo. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

Environmental historian Libby Robin described ecology as “the science of empire” (Demos 2016, 14), as it is far more than

the study of nature, encompassing bureaucratic, military and economic authority over living ecosystems. The art historian and cultural critic T.J Demos goes so far as to say that ecology is “a multifarious, complex, and at times contradictory pattern of bureaucratic rationalization, scientific and technological mastery, military domination, integration within the expanding capitalist economy, and legal systematization in order to manage and maximize the possibilities of resource exploitation” (Demos 2016, 14). Since the rise of the British Empire, colonialism has spread across the planet, and with it, notions of how nature can be reshaped, exploited, conserved, and discarded. Neocolonial practices of conservation and extraction remain in use today, and these have transformed the planet. In other words, nature has been colonised via conceptual frameworks, such as ecology, as they enable extractive relationships with our environment. In response to how ecology has been wielded as a tool of extraction and colonisation, Demos argues that ecological artistic practices can help instead decolonise nature (Demos 2016, 16) as they inform and educate the public about the environment and our perceived dominance over it. In order to decolonise nature, the legacies of British imperialism that are evident today — such as capitalism, neocolonial ecological practices and globalisation — must be taken into account and addressed, as they still affect the ways in which much of society and governments approach the natural world. Contemporary understandings of nature must be diversified in order to decolonise nature. The rush of troubled stories from around the world can be integrated into our knowledge practices (Tsing 2015, 28-34) via ecological art practices.

For Demos in particular, this decolonisation of nature is activated through environmental artistic practices; as they reflect on, assess, and critique the established powers and regulations that govern society; ultimately serving to broaden and complicate our understanding of the climate catastrophe and our relationship with it. These artistic practices intimately interrogate the structures and regulations that have been imposed on the environment for centuries. They serve as road

signs to alternative routes to relate to nature and conservation, contrary to those used by corporations, governments, and other neo-colonial systems that master and appropriate the earth. This decolonisation that Demos argues for takes into account INDIGENOUS practices, national borders, societal norms and cultural movements, as well as existing ecological theories. Through the lens of environmental artistic practices, Demos accentuates the need to respect and integrate the teachings of INDIGENOUS communities who effectively and equitably integrate conservation practices into everyday life.

As such, ecological art and exhibitions are potentially radical political tools beckoning society to consider how to care for a world we have exploited. They can be utilised to ultimately disrupt or rearrange what the philosopher Jacques Ranciere refers to as the “set of perception between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not” (Ranciere cited in Wójcik 2015). Since environmental art is often in dialogue with and opposition to political rhetoric and mandated policies that prescribe how resources are used and distributed, it challenges conventional normative structures and policies that render the environment vulnerable to extraction and exploitation. To be clear, art does not have political power: it cannot change policies, but it can disrupt viewers’ perceptions of established notions of justice and destruction, agency and conservation.

In 2018, two biennials, both in their 12th edition, engaged in dialogue on the Anthropocene, framing ecological issues in divergent ways. Both shows advocated for a decolonisation of nature, as Demos frames it, or “contaminated diversity” which Tsing describes as the coexistence, collaboration and interdependence of all species (Tsing 2015, 30). This drive to decolonise the natural world integrates environmental activism and awareness as a means to challenge the ways in which neoliberal globalisation and expansion have exploited this green earth. It also posits that intimacy, care and grounded relations with the planet and all living creatures can radically help counter the harm already caused.



Figure 2. View of the front of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. 2018. Photo by Leora Joy Jones.

The Taipei Biennial 2018 ‘Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem’ helped to question how artistic practices and individuals can work to collectively reimagine our role as perpetrators of earth’s destruction. Held in Taipei, Taiwan, at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) (17 November 2018–10 March 2019) [Figure 2], this venue was framed as an ecosystem to address urgent international and regional environmental issues. ‘Manifesta 12 – The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence’ opened a few months earlier, and was sprawled across the entire city of Palermo, Italy (16 June–4 November 2018). It posited that the planet can be viewed as a garden, with humanity as its caretakers. Both shows were shaped by their physical locations as well as each region’s social, political and economic dynamics. Despite the differing scales and locations of these settings — a museum in Asia and a city in Europe — both radically suggest we decolonise nature, and question the entrenched human/non-human divide to examine our role in the Anthropocene, as well as the ramifications of the extractive politics of capital. By framing a museum as an ecosystem, the Taipei Biennial

2018 highlighted how collaboration and coexistence can help society address urgent ecological matters. In contrast, Manifesta 12 positioned Palermo as a garden to engage with how human migration and syncretism is intertwined with the natural world and the climate crisis.

Both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 invited multidisciplinary practitioners such as artists, architects, biologists, activists, social groups, scientists, environmental communities, film-makers, writers, and experts from diverse fields to provide alternative approaches to dealing with disaster capitalism and environmental destruction. As such, these aesthetic practices are often interdisciplinary and collaborative, representing the multifaceted relationships that exist between art and other disciplines. Both shows challenged normative societal assumptions about humanity's relationship with the planet. Here, I examine the aims, accomplishments, and shortcomings of these two exhibitions by offering a comparative analysis of their engagement with ideas around the Anthropocene and how works exhibited exemplify the need to decolonise nature. These shows reveal how the wide ranging effects of capitalism and globalisation are linked to environmental destruction, and how fostering intimacy with nature can counter this.

### **The Taipei Biennial 2018 — 'Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem'**

Like all previous Taipei Biennials, the 2018 edition took place at TFAM. The curators — Mali Wu (Taiwan) and Francesco Manacorda (Italy) — invited 42 local and international multidisciplinary artists and other practitioners to examine ecological issues in the oldest art museum in Taiwan. This show explored urgent environmental concerns by configuring TFAM as an ecosystem, operating within a wider set of interlinked social, cultural, political and economic environments.

Wu and Manacorda reimagined the museum as an ecosystem to assist TFAM with three objectives: to recognise the institution's role as a social actor for the citizens of Taiwan; to aid ecological issues worldwide by contributing to

global discussions; and to best assist TFAM in implementing environmental changes (Wu and Manacorda 2019, 15–16). The first two goals were achieved through considered cross-disciplinary platforms and diverse programming which were established within and outside the museum’s walls. This included lectures, film screenings, and a wide range of seminars, field trips, boat rides, hikes, and workshops which reinforced the idea of a museum as an ecosystem with porous borders.<sup>3</sup> TFAM adopted this “interdisciplinary and participatory form,” so a diverse international and local audience could participate in these activities and engage with environmental issues (Wu and Manacorda 2019, 14). Many of these activities and projects took place outside of TFAM, and the programming expanded during the show’s duration, allowing visitors to conceive of the museum as a living and ever-changing ecosystem, rather than a fixed and sterile white cube.



Figure 3. Huai-Wen Chang, *Museum in the Clouds*, 2018, steel, membrane, weather station, water fog system, LED, 400×120×600 cm. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.



The final motivation for reimagining the museum as an ecosystem was to assist TFAM in implementing institutional changes, to become “more environmentally friendly” (Wu cited in Jones 2019, 38). Ping Lin, the then director of TFAM explained that it would help her and her colleagues in assessing how to “re-examine the function and mechanism of museums,” (Lin 2018, 12) so that interdependency can be reflected in artistic and institutional practices and institutional criticism can be integrated to improve the museum. Yet, upon closer inspection of the works exhibited at the Taipei Biennial 2018, only one project — *Museum in the Clouds* (2018) [Figure 3] by Huai-Wen Chang and Micro Architecture Studio (MAS)<sup>4</sup> — reflected on the institution’s environmental effects to help it implement changes, despite the curators’ attesting that this was a tenet of the programming. For two years, a weather station on the roof of the museum collected data from the air around TFAM, and air quality index (AQI) records were sourced from a remote (unnamed) location. For *Museum in the Clouds*, this data was visualised using mist and light on a curled steel frame with sails jutting from it, installed in one of the large windows on the second floor of the building. This collaborative project attempted to provide a specifically designed study so TFAM could improve and reflect on its carbon emissions. However, a weather station cannot actually quantify the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of a building.<sup>5</sup> The public was not informed what changes this installation may engender, but Huai-Wen Chang participated in the Taipei Biennial 2020 and *Museum in the Clouds* collected data long after the Taipei Biennial 2018 closed.<sup>6</sup> Aside from the supplementary programming, this was the only artwork at the Taipei Biennial 2018 that reflected on the museum’s carbon footprint, with an aim to provide solutions to its current “conditions”<sup>7</sup> and to make it more environmentally beneficial.

The title of the Taipei Biennial 2018 “Post-Nature”<sup>8</sup> was employed to indicate a move beyond the philosophical and conventional divide between the human and the natural worlds, ultimately countering notions of these conceptual frameworks of colonisation. A number of exhibited works critically reflected on

society's heightened anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are more important than all living creatures.



Figure 4. Robert Zhao Renhui, *When Worlds Collide*, 2017–2018, presented by the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

For *When Worlds Collide* (2017–2018) [Figure 4], Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui explored the migration and importation of birds, insects, and other animals,<sup>9</sup> exhibiting piles of boxes at TFAM — which people used to transport found injured or dead animals — alongside x-rays, specimens, and photographs. Through his examination of how certain species are deemed to be foreign or invasive as a result of their dominance, expansion, and effects on local ecosystems, Renhui subtly positions human beings as the invasive species. Likewise, Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja's *Museum of Nonhumanity* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 5] — a sparse museum exhibit with taxidermied animals awash in light from blue screens showing lectures from Taiwanese environmentalists and animal rights activists working in diverse fields — examines the ways in which the subjugation of nature

is justified by society’s imagined human/non-human boundary. This installation critiques this by presenting an alternative history of “dehumanization” in twelve themes<sup>10</sup> connecting the ways in which systemic oppression in society (such as racism or xenophobia) are linked to our exploitation of the natural world. *When Worlds Collide* and *Museum of Nonhumanity* critique how current human survival is dependent on dominance of the planet. Both projects question society’s anthropocentric approach to the earth, highlighting the violence created by the divide between humanity and other life forms.

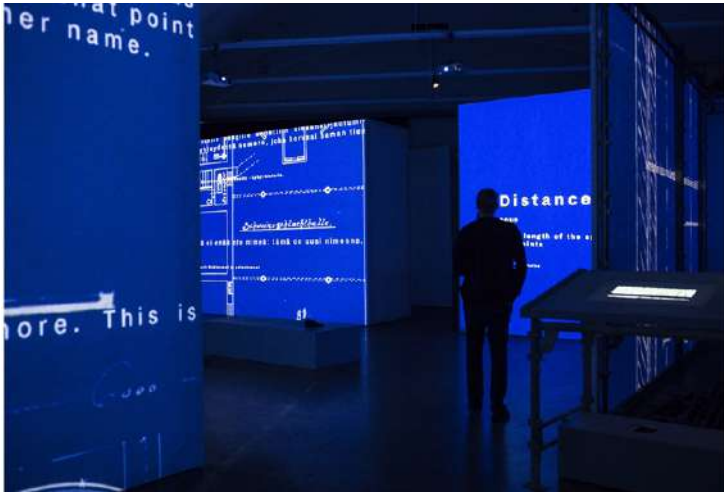


Figure 5. Gustafsson & Haapoja, *Museum of Nonhumanity*, 2016–ongoing, video installation. Courtesy of the participants and TFAM.

At TFAM, the placement of works reinforced the idea of a museum as an ecosystem, embracing the notions of contaminated diversity and intimacy; as many projects were housed close together, informing, overlapping and augmenting each other. Take for example the Mycelium Network Society’s eponymous 2018 work [Figure 6] which was housed in a large gallery on the first floor of the museum. White mycelium

mushrooms grew inside large transparent spheres hung from the ceiling. Connected electronic devices translated signals from the mushrooms into an audio component. The loud sounds, reminiscent of white noise, filled the large gallery and drowned out the chirping noises from the tiny bionic insects by Chu-Yin Chen and the Solar Insects Vivarium Workshop exhibited nearby. Strains of the mushrooms' song even reached the neighboring gallery where Ursula Biemann's *Acoustic Ocean* (2018) [Figure 7] was housed. Biemann's "science-fiction poetry"<sup>11</sup> film employed the sounds of a submarine, and other oceanic murmurs recorded by a young aquanaut near the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway. The curatorial placement of these works mimicked nature by creating an organic aural overlay: reminding me of how cicadas will suddenly and simultaneously begin buzzing and clicking, deafening the forest with unexpected song.



Figure 6. Mycelium Network Society (Franz Xaver, Taro, Martin Howse, Shu Lea Cheang, and global network nodes), *Mycelium Network Society*, 2018, mixed media, installation, 1000×800×360 cm. Courtesy of the participants and TFAM.

The multidisciplinary works on exhibit at the Taipei Biennial 2018 augment our understanding of nature, providing a multifaceted representation of ecological issues ranging from the ongoing destruction of the planet to reflections on how deeply intertwined humankind is with the environment, echoing Demos' entreaty to decolonise nature. This edition of the Taipei Biennial framed the museum as an ecosystem, utilising the notion of post-nature to reference how this planet's vulnerability is deeply intertwined with humanity's extractive systems. It examined the conventional human/nature divide and explored how an institution such as TFAM — which functions in social, economic, and political environments — can support collaborative action to adapt and improve.



Figure 7. Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, 2018, video installation, color, sound, 18min. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

**Manifesta 12 — “Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence”**

In contrast to the Taipei Biennial which is always held at TFAM, the peripatetic European biennial Manifesta, has been hosted

in Rotterdam, Luxembourg, San Sebastian, St. Petersburg, Zurich, and several other metropolises across Europe. One key difference between the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 is the site of these shows, which affects the ways in which issues of the Anthropocene and decolonisation are explored. The Taipei Biennial 2018 was hosted at a museum, examining the effects of the climate catastrophe in relation to an institution; while Manifesta 12 was able to explore how this crisis affects the policies, programs and public spaces of a city. Another significance of their respective sites is evident in how the Taipei Biennial is repeatedly housed in the same museum, and has extended upon themes presented in prior editions. For example, the Taipei Biennial 2018 built upon themes explored in the 2014 edition when curator Nicolas Bourriaud addressed how human activity has terraformed the planet. Likewise, the Taipei Biennial 2020 expanded on issues that the 2018 show presented; when the curators Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard and Eva Lin took as a starting point our inability to even agree on what it means to live on earth.

In comparison to the biennial at TFAM, Manifesta is a nomadic guest, showing up, settling in, then moving on to the next host city<sup>12</sup>, and so its continuity is premised on a change of site, and often, each edition reflects on the similarities and differences of each host city. The 12th edition of Manifesta — “Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence” (16 June–4 November 2018) was exhibited across the public parks, palazzos, churches, gardens, and museums of Palermo, Italy. Curated by a team of “creative mediators” (Van Der Haak et al 2018) including filmmaker Bregtje Van Der Haak (Holland), art curator Mirjam Varadinis (Switzerland); and architects Andrés Jacque (Spain) and Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli (Spain), the works of 50 participants were on display across 20 different venues in the city for five months. Much of the art was research-led and documentary-based, stemming from the Palermo Atlas<sup>13</sup>, an interactive urban research project completed before the opening of the show. The curators of Manifesta 12 framed the port city of Palermo as a garden, in an attempt to examine how this international city

— like many others around the world — is emblematic of how numerous geopolitical concerns, such as migration, are often intertwined with the climate crisis.

The threads of inquiry pursued in this show mirror the syncretism Paloma is famous for: over the last three millennia, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Normans, Saracens, Germans and Spaniards successively controlled Palermo. Labelled a “problematic-global” city by the curators (van der Haak et al 2018), Palermo’s long history of migration,<sup>14</sup> trafficking, trade routes, seedy tourism, and the effects of the climate crisis were explored in Manifesta 12. These concerns were examined in three main branches of the biennial. The ‘Garden of Flows’ section explored biodiversity, gardening and public spaces (Palermo’s Botanical Garden, founded in 1789, was the main venue for this section); projects in the ‘City on Stage’ strand presented a critical understanding of ongoing initiatives in Palermo’s municipality; and exhibits housed in the ‘Out of Control Room’ investigated the currents in contemporary global society (the work in these two branches of the biennial were spread across the city).

The exhibition’s title was adapted from the gardener and botanist Gilles Clément’s 1997 description of the earth as a “planetary garden”, with humankind as its “caretaker” (Van der Haak et al 2018). By definition, gardens are constructed spaces: regulated, maintained and cultivated by people. By positioning humanity as the planet’s gardener, responsible for tending to its maintenance and wellbeing, this framework complicates the narrative of a human/nature divide. The curators clarified that a planetary garden is not “a space for humans to take control,” but rather, “a site where gardeners recognise their dependency on other species, and respond to climate, time, or an array of social factors, in a shared responsibility” (Van Der Haak et al 2018). In light of this, a number of artists proposed alternative ideas of the garden, highlighting how it is entangled with colonial history and questioning the drive to control and regulate the earth.

Just as the subtitle ‘Cultivating Coexistence’ suggests, Manifesta 12 — much like the Taipei Biennial 2018 — was driven by a desire to examine the ways in which art can imagine

possible futures wherein humans collaborate with non-humans, and diversity and freedom of movement is celebrated. The Taipei Biennial 2018 embraced coexistence, emphasising how humanity is a part of nature, rather than separate from or superior to it. In contrast, the collaboration cultivated by Manifesta 12 considered how dominance asserted over nature is perpetuated by commercial, algorithmic and trade networks. Just as the curators of the Taipei Biennial 2018 articulated a need to decolonise nature, so did the curators of Manifesta 12. This team of four queried the ways in which it is best to “tend to a world that is moved by invisible informational networks, transnational private interests, algorithmic intelligence, environmental processes and increasing inequalities?” (van der Haak et al 2018). By questioning the existing networks that govern our world, the curators of Manifesta 12 foregrounded the climate crisis by linking the effects of environmental devastation to the region’s current political, social, and economic challenges, such as migration and the ongoing refugee crisis.

Both Manifesta 12 and the Taipei Biennial 2018 underscored the complexity of the climate crisis, examining how it is bound up with the extractive politics of capital, as well as the displacement of poor and disenfranchised people, who are disproportionately affected by environmental devastation. Certain projects at Manifesta 12 proposed that we reconfigure our conventional understanding of the environment, while also attempting to caution against the anthropocentric drive to control migration and regulate the natural world. For example, the Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku’s *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII)* (2018)<sup>15</sup> [Figure 8] was a processional performance with a large number of green painted participants carrying baskets of fruit and medicinal plants. The piece integrated research into festival customs and legends of West African rituals, accentuating how the trading and transportation of plants can provide conceptual routes into discussions on migration. Through this project’s veneration of plants as healers, and the mythical role nature has taken in many cultures, *Festival of the Earth* issues a warning against the self-delusional belief that humans can continue to dominate nature.





Figure 8. Jelili Atiku, *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII) 2018*, performance, mixed media installation. Photo by Ayo Akinwande and courtesy of the artist.

This procession snaked down ancient streets in Palermo, passing by historical architectural masterpieces that housed other artworks, many of which explored the lack of connection many people have with nature, such as Melanie Benajo’s three-part semi-documentary *Night Soil* (2014–2018)<sup>16</sup> [Figure 9]. Speaking over the colorful visuals and painted bodies — creating an intimate *mise-en-scène* — are the voices of several women discussing their feelings and the radical actions they’ve taken that defy societal norms; candidly cautioning against imposing inflexible systems that constrict people and the natural world. In one scene a bearded mermaid lies on their side, glowing tail twitching. “I realised I was completely out of my body,” a woman says of her experience using psychedelic drugs made from plants. “I don’t think I’m ever going to come back.”<sup>17</sup> In this video, plants themselves serve as psychological vehicles of transportation to unknown spaces, while in Atiku’s weaving procession, the

transportation of plants was used as an entry point into a discussion on the act of moving to new locales when migrating.



Figure 9. Melanie Bonajo, *Night Soil, Fake Paradise*, film still, 2014, full HD one-channel, 33.9 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and AKINCI.

After the procession, documentation of Atiku's *Festival of the Earth* was on display in a dilapidated palace near the port of Palermo. In three other locales in the city, three Sicilian trees serve as entry points to history, reminding us that human life is short, and entangled with other non-human lives. The Swiss artist Uriel Orlow brings these together in *Wishing Trees* (2018), a video installation that links the remains of an olive tree under which the WWII armistice was signed in 1943; a large banyan tree shading the former residence of a judge assassinated in the country's fight against organised crime in 1992; and a cypress tree, rumored to have grown from the wooden staff of St. Benedict (1526–1589), a freed son of African slaves who became a priest in the Catholic Franciscan community. Orlow's multi-part video installation, Benajo's films, and Atiku's

processional performance articulate the multiple ways in which humanity is closely intertwined with nature by evocatively exploring how trees serve as witnesses to human history, and how plants can transport us, connecting our past and future simultaneously, while also providing healing. These works, and many others sharply delineate how the climate crisis and other environmental concerns are bound up with transnational policies and governance.

At Manifesta 12, many artworks critically reflected on migration, civilisation, and nature, questioning humanity's drive to control and regulate the environment, which is evident in how botanical gardens are entangled with colonial history and power. By approaching the city, and by extension the planet, as a botanical garden, Manifesta 12 attempted to acknowledge the need to cultivate contamination and diversity. By positing humanity as the gardener, the curators acknowledged humanity's role in this entangled mess of desires to map, dominate, and impose systems on nature.<sup>18</sup>

### **Contaminated Coexistence**

Exhibited at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 was Zheng Bo's ongoing video work *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 10]. At Palermo, it was installed in a young growth cluster of bamboo in the city's ancient botanical garden, the site which informed the biennial theme and served as a central venue. Visitors approaching that corner of the garden heard the sounds of several sexually aroused men before seeing their youthful bodies copulating with ferns: licking, biting and crouching over them. At TFAM this video was exhibited in the final darkened room in the basement, and served as a summation to the show. The sensuality in *Pteridophilia* and its proposal of interspecies relationships offers a fascinating approach to ecology, magnifying Tsing's call for contaminated diversity. The heightened intimacy with plants exemplifies the radical ideas around the drive to use art as a vehicle to decolonise nature. Furthermore, this work, and many of the multiple narratives and collaborative artworks present at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta

12 serve to guide visitors to better understand what it means to decolonise nature, and exemplify how human and non-human relationships must be reframed to serve and protect all living creatures. Through the inclusion and placement of works, both exhibitions underscored humanity's fraught dynamic of control over the planet and the colonisation of its resources.



Figure 10. Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 2*, 2018. Single Channel Video, 4K Color Sound, 20mins. Zheng Bo. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

Through their conceptual and critical engagement with ideas around decolonising nature and their proposals for greater intimacy with the natural world, both shows emphasised the threats posed by the climate crisis, as well as the failings evident in current geopolitical strategies, communication, and trade. Artistic practices and aesthetics have the potential to fundamentally transform the way the world is imagined, inhabited, and co-created. Since change can be routed through aesthetics, the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 exemplify how in different ways, art illuminates the thoroughly enmeshed reality of humans and our vulnerable planet.

The sites of these shows shaped the different ways in which these two exhibitions engaged with the issues of the Anthropocene. The contrasting spaces of a museum and its institutional frameworks, and an urban city and its politics informed the ways in which these locations were respectively redefined as an ecosystem and a planetary garden. The Taipei Biennial 2018 integrated ecological collaboration to explore possible solutions for dealing with environmental issues, and this is exemplified in how TFAM was conceptualised as an ecosystem. In contrast, Manifesta 12 offered challenging perspectives on how society at large — as seen through the lens of Palermo — would benefit from recognising the interconnected realms of nature and our built environments. The frameworks of these exhibitions, despite being different in scale, location and rationale, ultimately serve the same purpose: proposing radical ways of living in and with nature.

Both exhibitions display a nuanced and complex understanding of the politics of artistic practices that deal with ecological issues. Neither show assumes that artistic practices can substitute politics. However, these exhibitions are deeply political, recognising the urgency and complexity of the current crisis, and the role of art and exhibitions in negotiating this. The Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 raise public awareness of a range of issues through their engagement with ideas and modes of art and exhibition-making, which makes them political and potentially transformative. Given the exigencies of our times, the propositions made are indeed radical: by framing a museum as an ecosystem and a city as a garden, the curators put a spotlight on the unending growth of contemporary capitalist society, critiquing societal norms while proposing alternative routes into the future, ones that embrace contaminated diversity and coexistence, magnifying the need to decolonise nature.

**Endnotes:**

1. Zheng Bo, "Pteridophilia" Zheng Bo, Accessed March 20, 2020. [http://zhengbo.org/2018\\_PP2.html](http://zhengbo.org/2018_PP2.html).
2. A few prominent shows include: the Lithuanian Pavilion's *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (2019) at the 2019 Venice Biennale, which won the prestigious Golden Lion award for its subdued operatic performance, offering a biting critique of leisure; the tenth Taipei Biennial "The Great Acceleration" (2014), billed as "a tribute to the coactivity amongst humans and animals, plants and objects"; "Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009" at the Barbican Gallery, London (2009), and "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art", at Chicago's Smart Museum of Art (2006), both investigated the ways that nature, art and architecture can be integrated to better create built environments; and lastly "Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies" (2002) at Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre, which showcased artists' innovative solutions to help restore ecosystems around the world. These and many other wide-ranging ecological projects propose we move away from the conventional understanding of nature as a resource to be used and extracted.
3. Furthermore, a whole gallery on the third floor was dedicated to local NGO's, foundations, and educational organisations and foundations that presented ongoing socially engaged pedagogical projects happening across Taiwan. At TFAM, these NGOs had large wooden boards detailing their missions, activities and history. Here, I am referring to The Taiwan Thousand Miles Trail Association, the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, Open Green, and the Keelung River Guardian Union.
4. MAS is composed of a large group of students from Tamkang University, Taiwan who consult with a "transdisciplinary team" of workers from fields including "architecture, landscaping, environmental engineering, ecology, water resources, smart control, lighting and interactive installation." See TFAM "Huai-Wen Chang and Micro Architecture Studio (MAS)" *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem Taipei Biennial 2018 Guide Book* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018) 84.
5. Weather stations can only collect and measure microclimate data from the building's surroundings, such as "temperature, heat radiation, ultraviolet light, wind flow velocity, wind direction and rainfall" so the assumption that it can measure carbon emission levels is misleading. TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio (MAS), *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.

6. After requesting further information on this project from TFAM, I was informed that Chang was invited to participate in the 2020 Taipei Biennial curated by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard and Eva Lin at the time of writing this, Museum in the Clouds was still collecting data which was made available to the public at the 2020 Taipei Biennial as a “proposal as to how to improve the museum’s conditioning going forward.” TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio (MAS), *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.
7. TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio, *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.
8. ‘Post-Nature’ has a contentious prefix, and could allude to a once-natural world, now nearly barren and slathered in cement. Or it could reference how this planet’s vulnerability is deeply intertwined with human systems (Huang 2019: 43-48).
9. Renhui traces the connections between three local institutions - the Taipei Zoo, the Wild Bird Association, and Taiwan’s Academia Sinica, which is an academy that supports a wide variety of research activities.
10. The themes in the Museum of Nonhumanity: ‘Person’ (object, legal personhood, law), ‘Potential’ (research, subjecthood), ‘Monster’, ‘Resource’ (industry, conflict minerals), ‘Boundary’ (female soldier, Amazon), ‘Purity’ (eugenics, institution), ‘Disgust’ (pest control, genocide, colonial history), ‘Anima’ (soul, reason, Western thought), ‘Tender’ (flesh, kitchen), ‘Distance’ (systems, holocaust, slaughterhouse), ‘Animal’ (the Other) and ‘Display’ (museum, references). TFAM. “Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja.” *Post-Nature*. 2018, 43.
11. TFAM. “Ursula Biemann.” *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem Taipei Biennial 2018 Guide Book* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018) 36.
12. The nomadic framework of Manifesta may limit certain art projects’ opportunities to deeply investigate issues and concerns relevant to its host city, before transitioning to the next location. However, it may be that a number of projects at one Manifesta continue to engage with communities in the host city well after the event’s timeframe, or that certain projects hinge on a continuous migration from one place to another.
13. The Palermo Atlas Project utilised many disciplines to provide a collection of stories from Palermo’s citizens, complete with an introduction by the mayor of the Sicilian capital, to ascertain whether it might provide an “urban prototype for the world to come.” Manifesta 12. “Publications” Accessed April, 27, 2020 <http://m12.manifesta.org/publications/>.
14. A timely example of Palermo’s long history of migration arose in June 2018, when Manifesta 12 was launched. The local news channels were fixated on a

boat of refugees attempting to dock in Palermo despite the Italian government's attempts to reject it. The mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, wished to welcome these refugees, to remind the citizens of Palermo's multicultural past.

15. Jelili Atiku's *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII)* (2018) was part of the 'City on Stage' strand.

16. Melanie Benajo's *Night Soil* (2014–2018) was included in the 'Garden of Flows' strand.

17. Ayahuasca is one mind-altering psychedelic drug made from plants that is used in shamanic rituals. The women in Melanie Benajo's *Night Soil* speak extensively of their experiences with this particular drug. Melanie Benajo. "Night Soil / Fake Paradise Trailer" Producer Melanie Benajo. Published Jan 7, 2015. Youtube. 2:20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpCxYSRgcLU>

18. Despite the issues that were examined through the inclusion of many artworks, there were some problems with this edition of Manifesta, which, in light of the thesis of the show, ultimately served to highlight the extractive nature of humanity and our species drive for power and control. Palermo's mayor, Leoluca Orlando, is well known for actively fighting against the Mafia's stronghold on the port city, and his attempts to transform Palermo into a progressive and cultural hotspot served as an impetus for inviting Manifesta to occupy its buildings and streets in 2018. The Palermo municipality funded most of the show, and the rest of the costs were supplemented by private investors, public donations and ticket sales. Despite the fact that this biennial increased tourism in Palermo, and the subsequent money that tourists bring with them served to boost the economy, many of Manifesta 12 workers were still waiting to be paid for their work, years on. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, many foundations, libraries and other institutions that participated in the biennial were yet to hear about reimbursement.

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