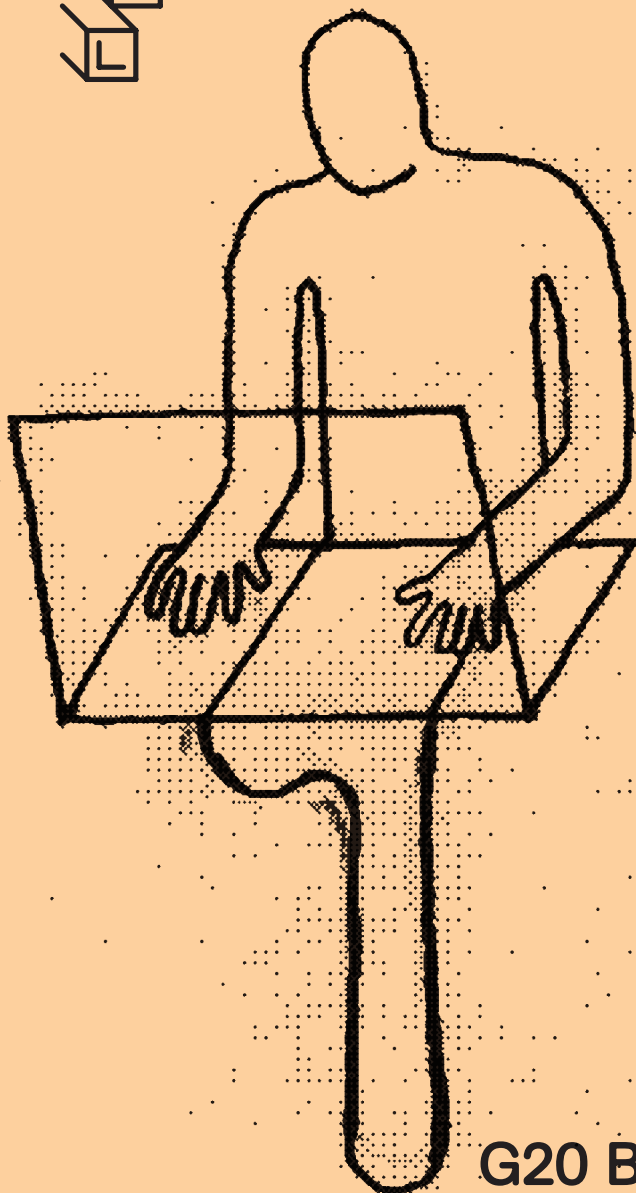


Biljana  
Ciric



G20 Blue –  
Letter from the  
Future



I have a seventeen-month-old son. Since becoming a mother, my day in Shanghai, where we are based, will start with turning on a computer, checking Shanghai's air quality index and then decide how to continue a day with my kid. On a regular day, the air quality pollution index in Shanghai is usually around 150 PM 2.5 which is not recommended for taking such a small kid outdoors<sup>1</sup>.

Since the end of July this year air quality has been noticeably better so that we can actually see the clouds in the sky when we look out of a window. Maybe this sounds bizarre, but clouds are rarely seen in Shanghai. The reason for this is the G20 meeting that was held in Hangzhou in early September, a city that is a one-hour train ride from Shanghai<sup>2</sup>. Hangzhou hosted this meeting of world leaders and due to their arrival over two hundred heavy industry factories in Shanghai and over one hundred of them in Hangzhou's surroundings have been closed for over one month to lower the pollution level and they actually succeeded<sup>3</sup>. On the Chinese app Wechat (similar to WhatsApp) Shanghai's blue sky these days is called G20 Blue, their sense of humor reflecting the reality of our basic existence.<sup>4</sup>

Some lives are worth saving and others are obviously too expensive to save, for example the lives of us ordinary men and women.

China's rapid climate change is very noticeable and impossible to deny in the last ten years. Heavy summer heats, an air pollution level that during winter time can go as high as 400 on the index chart, more and more people with respiratory problems including kids, to name a few.

Their heavy development, industrialization, and expanding of foreign trade, urge the whole country to turn into a machine for building capital promoted in the mainstream media as the Chinese dream for a better future to be achieved with the sacrifice of a normal life and healthy well being. Of course, humans, as we are, we deny seeing these connections, and we also deny trying to make change. Described here is the model of globalization, very much built on the US model, and considered the global standard.

The above-mentioned doesn't only affect China and its people, but the whole planet. In relation to the title Fall Semester borrowed from the Gauguin painted in Tahiti, one of the islands in Polynesia that in recent years has monitored a rise in sea levels that threatens a loss of coastline. This will be a threat to many islands on Pacific in the not so far away future.

How big economies like China and USA affect climate change and what kind of impact these changes have on small countries and nations is something rarely discussed. What should be the responsibilities of countries that are causing these effects and what should be the concrete measures for protecting the ones who are not major players of the game and are not causing pollution, but who are the first to feel its effects, is also not publicly discussed.

We are not talking about crises that will appear and will be gone soon. No, this is the new reality and obviously this new reality will not unite us, but gaps will be bigger and deeper. Taking Shanghai that is my daily reality as an example.

The distinction between people who have and who have not is reflected on the everyday level: the wealthy install systems for air filtration in their homes, including water purifying systems, their children will go to kindergartens and schools whose indoor air quality and pollution levels are monitored at all times (outdoor activities are rare) while the majority that cannot afford all these things, sometimes not even basic air conditioning during summer heats, will have kids who go to institutions where there is no mention of these issues and simply continue to live their lives hoping to earn more and upgrade their basic living conditions or they just ignore everything related to climate change. It is the model of future-capitalism without utopia.

Human selfishness and greed are only intensified by capitalism. The human urge to exploit, to put oneself above others, including nature, is still our main trajectory and the creation of geo-political powers and disparities are more and more significant.

States are developing systems where these are reaching extremes and we rarely reflect on the reality imposed on us in a public realm.

G20 Blue is just one example that didn't cause public discussion

During this last month I followed very closely a number of public platforms, including Wechat and other online media and there was no intellectual, artist or cultural worker from any field that stood up and publicly wrote about what is mentioned above to say: Look people, it is actually possible to clean up the air. We should push our government to do for us what it did for the G20, at least to a certain extent to lower the pollution level. There was no museum, nor institution that tried to address issues of climate change through talks, programming or exhibitions referring to the current situation directly or indirectly.

Silence...

No one said anything.

Only images of the white clouds in the blue sky circulated on social media. However, many of those who actually posted these images didn't know how come that the sky turned blue.

The new reality in this locality created a new type of individual, of subjectivities that Bifo defines as the creation of lived temporalities that constructs impersonal memory and a press-bottom-reaction to the world.

Accordingly, the Wechat app has been a successful tool for creating this kind of individual and a his/her very much image-based reality that due to impressive speed of information sharing creates conditions where you lack time for in-depth information digestion or empathy. You are forced to take in information with a speed that shortens our memory about what we have seen and read, and reduces our responses to banal comments.

The NYT in its video on Wechat calls it the super app and explains that it is actually turning into the model for many apps in the former western world nowadays<sup>5</sup>. It makes communication highly convenient without the need of leaving your apartment, but

is also a successful tool for collecting personal data and having these shared with companies and governments.

Many argue that Wechat is a democratizing tool. Its instant reactions have exposed many corruption and social injustice cases that Without Wechat would not leak into the public realm and would not cause public debates that many follow. However, these exposures are closely monitored and are always within certain limits of discussion within the public realm.

Just to give an example of the level of government control over Wechat: recently, just before the G20 meeting, the local government published a notice of that the Wechat service in Zhe Jiang province (the province in which the city of Hang Zhou is situated) would be closed down between August 28th to September 9th, 2016 in order to “re-structure the system” (this maintenance work happened to be exactly during the G20 meeting and in the same place). The simple and powerful gesture of turning it off and cutting off the only communication channel that people are using.

We can argue, “yes but this is China”, as we like to talk about Chinese censorship, but no actually this is a future where we are all heading, China is just one step ahead.

The importance of the citizen’s role has been minimized to become that of who produces and consumes, and it is exactly between these two poles that we spend most of our time.

The public sphere has been transformed into a highly monitored realm with the government on one side and highly corporate powers on the other, turning it into a consumerist sphere in its main manifestation. Art-related institutions are slowly slipping into this category as well.

Different apps, similar to Wechat, will in the near future make our lives easier in different parts of the world. Shopping for food is not done in supermarkets anymore, taxis are not hailed on the street, you can have massage ordered through an app... Everything we need will be done through apps (this is the Shanghai reality nowadays and please don’t forget that today in China there is still no Facebook, no Instagram and no Google. It is not the Internet but an internal network).

Everyday we will feel that we lived through all the images that our friends post just flicking through them without realizing

that we didn't leave home for a whole day and we will be happy because one friend has described his daily experience.

Consequently, our actions are monitored, our curated choices saved to company's data bases that will perform their tasks even better in making us into perfect consumers.

Our physicality will exist only through organized mass existence, not as an individual but as an abstracted number.

The reader might wonder what does this have to do with G20?

New technology, an extension of ourselves through different media, created new modes of communication and presence of self or maybe selves, at the same time changing not only our physical existence but also our environment. The question is what kind of new form of existence we are moving towards.

The environment is changing, we humans are changing and adapting to new conditions. It is in constant mutation, usually a violent one, but thanks to our endless ability to adapt, humans will keep its existence. The problem is where this will take us? What is the new future for us? Will it be that new technology creates humans that are obedient to control and who take things for granted without the urge for changing our passive condition? Are there new possibilities, new modes of resistance within these networks of a great number of minorities that have still not surfaced? While many discuss the possibility of new technologies, I would like to argue for the importance of physical experience and direct encounters that are nowadays less and less discussed as something that we don't need, but this is crucial for finding different ways of resistance.

Exhibitions as a physical reality have the possibility for articulating a public opinion that could find gaps within the public sphere and lead to public discussion about values different from the mainstream. The importance of these physical encounters, I believe, is greater in societies where different control measures of individuals both physical and virtual exist.

I am here discussing the idea of exhibiting not as a colonial format of display from the 19th century European museum tradition that is struggling with its existence today, but thinking of exhibiting as a physical existence through which new connections could be fostered rather than a

dualism between subject/object, nature/human, or male/female, etc.

Museums should be a rare space where through exhibitions a public sphere could be created, opening space for discussion around urgent issues of our time today. In the specific context of China these institutions are split into two pools: state museums who are struggling to find its position of relevance within the current social framework, and private museums who in close collaboration with the government (usually real estate or risk investment companies) and typically private wealthy owners who are starting their own collections, framing the museum not as a space where urgent issues are discussed and knowledge is produced and where artists and intellectuals can create a public sphere but places where leisure time has been spent as a symbol of good taste of the up-and-coming middle class. Again, part of the consumerist set. The museum's owners and investors perform multi-tasking jobs serving as curators and role models of a new class and city life style that needs to incorporate culture and art.

A very small window to the possible temporal public realm is shrunk till it is non-existent.

This could be discussed in the larger context, not only China's.

While contemporary art in China and its practitioners are in their third decade since formation, the market has been taken as a main parameter of value and from in line with the mainstream perspective the major contribution of art practitioners is measured through the capital. This fact has turned China into a great attraction for the rest of the world, in a number of fields. China is this potential that we are to discover, dig into and get from. Again, a very selfish colonial sentiment.

What we are lacking is an understanding relationship on a level where connections are established on equal bases where both sides take responsibilities for actions that we perform not only acknowledging the issue at a distance but also acting to create change.

Aren't we the one who are consuming goods produced in China, including its contemporary art? Of course the Chinese



pragmatic spirit uses this, and is re-creating the relationship of the power structure from one hundred years ago with its own position in a more powerful seat within a global context, but without really thinking whether there are any other relationships that we can produce.

What we can do about all this?

We should stop looking at the China's reality as far away news, but as our common reality and for that we should make a radical break and stop thinking of China as the Other. The moment this happens the actual change will happen.

G20 Blue wasn't only our reality, but worlds that could happen anywhere in the future. We didn't speak up as we didn't think it was our problem. It was China's.

In a recent interview, activist Ai Xiaoming<sup>6</sup> stated that in China there are no intellectuals as they all corrupted.<sup>7</sup> So if there is no intellectual, what kind of practitioners are artists or curators?

While a number of artists have joined the above-mentioned corrupted club (as my artist friend asked to comment on the silence related to G20 Blue stated: "artists and professors are competing between each other to see who is driving the faster car, whose house is bigger, who's steak is better..."<sup>8</sup>), a very small number are still trying to respond to the changes that our society has imposed on us. Not only in China but elsewhere. If for nothing else, then at least for the sake of creating an archive that will stand up to mainstream narrative and tell the story from a different angle.

This text serves the same purpose of archiving in relation to the new reality that for some is the actual present we are living in and for others is just text that he/she would read as far away future.

Actually that future is much closer than we assume.

**1** To draw a comparison, the pollution level in Paris is 20.  
**2** More about the G20 meeting can be found here: [http://www.g20.org/English/aboutg20/AboutG20/201511/t20151127\\_1609.html](http://www.g20.org/English/aboutg20/AboutG20/201511/t20151127_1609.html)  
**3** For more information, please read this article in China Daily: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>

[china/2016-06/22/content\\_25797965.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-06/22/content_25797965.htm)  
**4** [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-06/22/content\\_25797965.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-06/22/content_25797965.htm)  
**5** <http://www.nytimes.com/video/technology/100000004574648/china-internet-wechat.html>  
**6** Ai Xiaoming is one of the China's leading documentary

filmmakers and activists.  
**7** <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/09/08/people-in-retreat-chinese-filmmaker-ai-xiaoming/>  
**8** From a private wechat conversation translated from Chinese.

**Biljana Ciric** is an independent curator based in Shanghai. She is co-curator of the 2015 Third Ural Industrial Biennale for Contemporary Art (Yekaterinburg, Russia) and she was curator in residency at Kadist Art Foundation (Paris) where she recently curated exhibition Habits and customs of ... are so different from ours that we visit them with the same sentiment that we visit exhibitions. She also curated Encounters with Pompidou within exhibition Museum On/off, Centre Pompidou (2016). She is a research fellow for 2016 at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Norway. Her recent exhibitions include Just as

Money is the Paper, the Gallery is the Room (2014) presented by Osage Art Foundation (Hong Kong), One Step Forward, Two Steps Back—Us and Institution, Us as Institution (2013) presented by Times Guangzhou Museum (Guangzhou), Tino Sehgal Solo Exhibition (2013) in UCCA (Beijing), Taking the Stage OVER (2011—12) presented in different institutions in Shanghai, Institution for the Future – Asia Triennale (2011) in Manchester, Alternatives to Ritual (2012—13) in Goethe Open Space (Shanghai) and OCAT (Shenzhen) among others.



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