

LETTER TO THE CURATORS

Rotterdam, June 18, 2019

*'The world is turning
Hope it don't turn away'
Neil Young*

Dear Sarah, dear Thijs,

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned us in the fall of 2018 that to avoid catastrophe, human societies have 12 years to completely transform the way we use energy and land. Change is urgently needed and on a scale for which 'there is no documented historical precedent'.

But how, I wonder, can human society begin to respond to a looming crisis of both uncertain timing and catastrophic dimensions? How can it begin to right itself when its entire infrastructure and culture developed in a way that leaves it overwhelmingly vulnerable to natural disaster?

In 2016, the IABR wholeheartedly committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed upon by the United Nations and to the goals set out in the Paris Climate Agreement. The IABR wanted to contribute to the solving of the immense task we face by using the tools we have as a research and development institute and an international cultural platform: research by design, the power of imagination and the potency of design.

Now, barely three years later, we do know a lot more already. Enough to have to face up to the fact that if we truly want a future that offers somewhat realistic alternatives to our current unsustainable way of life, we can no longer afford to make any mistakes, not really. If we want to make a meaningful contribution at all, in our case by designing for the future, we have to make it in the conviction that it is a future that we not only want, but that we *can* want. We must explore, examine, test, design and imagine and work, step by step but purposefully, towards that future.

However, 'there's a danger that we're so desperate to have some hopeful perspective that we're really not engaged in the bigger critique of what capitalism is doing and the ways that development is continuing to endanger vulnerable people in cities,' warns South-African author and eco-activist Ashley Dawson. When we imagine and design, we should not be naive nor unreasonably optimistic. We have to reckon with the fact that design cannot be both an instrument of neoliberalism and at the same time an activist force in the fights against climate change and for social justice.

This is why we also have to critically examine the conditions under which we design and the system in which we design: not only the site, but the situation, too; not just the specific challenge, but also the system. Such insights, or intuitions if you want, occurred to me after the previous biennale, the first part of *The Missing Link* diptych – that we cannot address the missing link by pinning all our hopes on transformational comprehensive design. I've come to suspect that the missing link, instead of just the impediment that we believe it is, may be precisely what makes the current system tick, and that we cannot address it without critically examining the system itself, that is, the conditions under which we design, and for whom.

Down to Earth

IABR–2020 starts from the premise that we are facing the deepest crisis in human memory. And that we have no time to waste. Can we transform our urban landscapes and living environments, comprehensively and democratically – with time for serious reflection on *how* we do it and *for whom– while doing it?* I'm paraphrasing the American sociologist and author on climate politics Daniel Aldana Cohen, who is among a group of activists who are now putting the relationship between design and the Green New Deal on the agenda. Because yes, we do need real climate action, and we do need a new political orientation – and the two need to go hand in hand if we are serious about finding new ways to inhabit the territory. 'Belonging to a territory is the phenomenon most in need of rethinking and careful re-description; learning new ways to inhabit the Earth is our biggest challenge. Bringing us down to earth is the task of politics today,' writes French philosopher Bruno Latour.

All right, DOWN TO EARTH it is. We may have our heading – to be decided. But then, where can we land? Now, and how, as you, Sarah, rightly insist.

Where to land, how to settle, how to inhabit the Earth, this is very much a design challenge and, like it or not, it puts designers smack dab in the middle of the struggle for political reorientation. The act of (re)designing and (re)sharing space evidently is a *political* act in the New Climatic Regime that Latour calls for. Alliances between designers, citizens and stakeholders have to be rigorously reconfigured in terms of *politics as what leads to bringing us down to earth*. However, and in spite of the rhetoric, spatial designers have not yet learned to think as activists and spatial design has yet to become a form of political activism. As landscape architect Billy Fleming, whose work is focused on the intersection of science, politics, and design as they pertain to climate change, writes: 'Before we ask the world to view design as an urgent necessity, we must look at sites, tools, and structures and remake our disciplines to be more useful, in the moment, for the movements and ideals we aspire to serve. We must rethink how design engages with social and political movements.'

NOW – HOW

How can design be an instrument for genuine social change, *now*? *How* does what work where and why, *now*? How are the strength of imagination and design best used to connect challenges that loom large to the urgent need to make a physically and socially resilient city, *now*? How can we, as we now explore what is possible, develop strategies and form alliances to demonstratively and systematically implement concrete transformations “useful for the ideals we aspire to serve”? And against all resistance, or better, with sufficient public support - for all three of us think it is crucially important that asking *how* also implies asking how we can create a quality living environment for everyone: how can we make cities that work for all? How can we translate our resolution into (political) action? Where can we land? Now, and how?

The main challenge the 2020 biennial faces will be to represent and present best strategies that show how now.

Water and Energy Transition as Leverage

So how do we whip all that into a biennale, into exhibitions, a program?

We start from the SDGs – all of them. We know the challenge is to be comprehensive and that this is extremely complex. We are ready to embrace that complexity. Nevertheless, we can't do it all – it's only the IABR. We will therefore focus on two major tasks in 2020: the water challenge and the energy transition. We emphatically consider them means to exert leverage, i.e. not exclusively as problems for which we urgently have to find solutions, but also as means to prize open this complex, large, integrated, city-making challenge. And not only in a physical sense, but explicitly also in a social sense.

‘There are ways to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. They entail a mix of measures that lower emissions and reduce the impacts of climate change, while contributing to poverty eradication and reducing inequalities,’ writes the IPCC. As you, Sarah, have told us, IABR–2020 is an opportunity to explore the practical implications of social justice, that is, equal opportunity, in a safe and healthy environment. This is precisely why the SDGs are an indispensable frame: they may enable us to avoid crude cost-benefit analyses and dedicate investment to genuine sustainable development more often than now. And to start questioning the existing paradigm, as Thijs told us, and no longer ask what the costs of a new energy system are, and not even just what its value might be, and for whom, but to also investigate who decides on what value is, and how what value is assumed to be is hard-wired into a system that now prevents us from realizing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Dramaturgy

The decision to focus on the water challenge and the energy transition will also make it possible to largely structure the biennale's argument, its narrative, along lines and using material that we, the IABR, developed together with our partners, for example in our

Ateliers. Without pretending, obviously, that we are able to conclusively answer these *how* questions in our own research practice. In 2020, as during previous biennales, we will use the IABR–Ateliers as trump cards, as important anchor points of programs and exhibitions. Around these we will arrange the proofs collected by others in other places in one form or another. Proofs I’m asking you to find and display.

The Water Challenge as leverage: How can we use acute water problems to find solutions that have a broad positive impact on people’s living environment?

The Energy Transition as leverage: How can we use the inevitable energy transition to create a more socially inclusive city?

It’s not easy to present the *how* in an exhibition, to demonstrate the best strategies in such a way that they are accessible and offer real prospects for action to others.

Luckily, the water challenge and energy transition are excellent protagonists, perfect for the heroic part they play in the story we are about to tell, because the public can identify with them. Everybody understands that water is going to present a problem; everybody knows that we have to lose the gas and the oil.

A good dramaturgy will enable us to unfold the story, from the imaginable and recognizable problems concerning water and energy to the *how* of the major, complex, multiple and integrated challenge of making cities resilient. If the objective to which we want to contribute with IABR–2020 is that of fostering people’s capacity to act and offering them prospects for action, and even that of inciting political activism, then the water challenge and the energy transition can be very well used as leverage in a narrative sense, too.

I realize that what I’m asking of you represents quite a challenge. I thank you for accepting that challenge and I look very much forward to exploring the ways to meet it together with you, with the co-curators, with all our partners and with the IABR–team.

Writing this letter, I’m reminded of what Neil Young sings: ‘The world is turning, hope it don’t turn away’. Hope is not enough by itself, though, it’s not gratuitous. Hope is a risk that must be run. Let’s run it.

My warmest regards,

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