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# Archiagape

Let's recall the horrors of The Great War, also known as World War One. Europe shattered, countries fell apart, entire cities and towns blown up, homes smashed to pieces, hearts broken, and millions dead. Germany, in particular, was crushed, resulting in the politically unstable Weimar Republic that tried to save the country's economy from hyperinflation and people from starvation. As a reaction to all these ills, the Bauhaus School was set up. It was a school seeking to reimagine design for a novel human being, for a new and better world. And although there may be reasons to question the modernist failings that emerged from the work of its faculty members and pupils, one can still admire their aspirations.

Designers, architects, and artists today face a similar situation with climate change, the planet's sixth mass extinction, an immense loss of natural habitat, a colossal amount of pollution, social upheavals, and various unending conflicts. As a result, they have—just like the Bauhauslers—gone to work trying to imagine a better world and also how to achieve that dream. This volume is at the core of this ongoing effort. At first sight, the work herein has the flair of otherworldly craziness and imaginative drive that easily matched the artistic upheaval of the Bauhauslers. "WTF!" was my own immediate reaction when I first walked into the exhibition associated with this book. In their inquiry into the basic foundations of art and design, the participants sought to find paths out of our social and environmental mess. These are bewildering ambiguous paths, however, and intentionally so. Instead of offering silver bullets and one-size-fits-all solutions, the projects tease and tickle the viewers, thereby forcing us to see the future of our world differently.

The works in *Ambiguous Territory* exist in a creative space, in the moody realm of possibilities. It's a sphere of design in which solutions (or lack thereof) have yet to settle. That should be a familiar feeling for all creative people, whose daily life may include exploring a way out of a problem without being able to nail down an exact answer. This volume belongs in that territory of ambiguity and curiosity, a place where there is room for

musings, laughter, and despair. The projects convey, in different ways, a hope for a better future, but also a sense of not knowing if that future is at all possible. They are situated in that creative space somewhere between optimism and pessimism. One does not have to look far outside this volume to find people who propagate solutions to our environmental crisis, such as building better electric cars, figuring out sustainable construction techniques, or also non-polluting ways of assembling things. These innovations are more often than not associated with private companies and also the know-how of engineering. The optimism entailed is, at some level, comforting and encouraging. On the pessimistic side, there are those who, when confronted with our environmental and social problems, have given up and drifted into midnight-like rituals of dark ecologies signaling the end of the world. That pessimism is also fascinating, though all things dark tend to hamper the ability to see what's in front of you. And then there are those who occupy ambiguous territories of both optimism and pessimism, without landing on any humdrum realism. And that is where I find the eminent artists, designers, and architects of this volume, whether their work reflects the atmospheric, biologic, or geologic state of our planet.

In the good old days, nature was an innocent site in which the architects would design and help the construction of a home. The triumphant male builder would typically begin by sticking "the first spade in virgin ground" (without reflecting on the sexualized language of doing so). The narrative of untouched nature being altered by the designer still prevails in conservative-leaning architectural debates to this day, even though this intact nature is long gone. Walk into any natural place and you will find human agency. Our pollution and markings are everywhere. In my home country Norway, for example, scientists have found microplastics in faraway mountain trout. The great Pacific garbage patch of marine pollution debris is another, more dramatic, example. Not to mention airborne pollution measured in the winds of the remote Antarctic. And then there are the greenhouse gasses that cause climate change, which is now at the forefront of public debate. Geologists have labeled the period we live in as the "Anthropocene" as a reflection on the human-dominant influence on the environment and the climate. Indeed, humans are changing the face of the Earth so dramatically that they coined the word to describe a new planetary epoch formed by humans. In this Anthropocene environment, artists have begun reflecting on how to engage in debates about climate and the degradation of our shared environment. Contemporary landscape

art tends to mirror a world in which everything is touched by human hands. The same is true concerning the material from which buildings emerge. How to design within such a "post-natural" environment?

The ambiguous post-nature is at the core of this volume, in which artists, designers, and architects reflect on how to proceed. Recycling and up-cycling materials seem to be the first line of response to the problem. And it's a good one. Please do! Yet, these efforts may only scratch the surface of a deeper issue related to post-natural materials. To take an example: a fresh plank of wood purchased to build a home may contain absorbed pollution by the tree from where it was growing. That may not be harmful to the new home, but who knows? Then there is the issue of understanding where the plank of wood came from before it arrived at the construction site, and where it would end when the house is no more. An investigation into this trail of damage may start at what the loss of a tree meant to a forest. The next step would be to figure out how much polluting energy it took to transport it to the construction site, and who benefitted along its way. At the other end of the trail, one may ask what will happen to the plank of wood when the time has come for demolition. It's now filled with nails, thus adding to the post-natural condition of the earth when it turns into the ash of compost. The example of the plank of wood may illustrate that the post-natural is all too real. The same lines of tracing could be done for all other building materials and entire landscapes. Our nature is now truly ambiguous.

There are some illuminating historical examples of such ambiguous territories. Back in medieval times, nature could take different meanings. Animals could, at the same time, be living members of a community, a resource for consumption, and a spiritual message from God. In old bestiaries, one can read about a rooster being both meat and a message from God about getting up in the morning. And then there are reports of encounters with dragons and unicorns, the animal forms into which the Devil and Jesus would emerge disguised. That spiritual world is gone today, while a new mixture has emerged. Today animals may contain garbage as living witnesses to our environmental state while others live as scientifically half-bred technologies signaling both hopes and fears for the future. The same is true with respect to insects, fish, plants, minerals, and entire landscapes. These are ambiguous territories of both jaw-dropping beauty and frightening ugliness. Nature has become both natural and artificial at the same time.

Such an ambiguous territory requires an interdisciplinary approach to comprehend the interwoven web of the post-natural. Interdisciplinary is nothing new for architects, designers, and artists who, for centuries, have been known to work in close collaboration with engineers, lawyers, calculators, and financial accountants. This territory of disciplines, however, has been shaped in a combined effort to extract and exploit nature as a resource. A more ambiguous territory of knowledge would also include ways of understanding that do not aim at exploitation. That could include fields ranging from literature to biology, ecology, indigenous knowledge, and the social and anthropological sciences. The aim of such knowledge production would be to raise a new form of consciousness in the ways we should think about (or not think about!) the post-natural world. Environmental artists, designers, and architects aim at comprehending forms of living respectfully within this new Anthropocene condition.

This is a new trend and historical shift. The word "architecture," it is worth recalling, comes from ancient Greek in which ἀρχιτέκτων *arkhitekton* "architect" combines ἀρχι- "chief" and τέκτων "creator." The long history of architecture has more often than not been about that Chief-creator, and as a consequence, architectural bookstores are filled with volume after volume with famous names in the titles. It's called the Fountainhead Syndrome. The field has suffered from this Chief-creator complex, with thousands of architectural minions and interns working for negligible earnings in the offices of famous architects. There is a long trail of human misery caused by the monomania of these starchitects, with associated social and environmental violence. Thankfully, the profession is changing rapidly towards cultures of inclusion, cooperation, and care for the planet and each other. Of all the designers, artists, and architects I have met, I have yet to find anyone motivated by stardom or money. Instead, they have something more important in common: they love what they do. That passion is drawn into every minute detail of *Ambiguous Territory*. There is an undertone of caring for our world in all the projects, and a call for more compassion in caring for our social and environmental condition. It is thus a paradox that the name of the profession—Chief-creator—does not capture the field's changing aspiration and culture. Hence, I wonder, how can we articulate this shift?

Perhaps, the profession needs a new name. How about replacing "architecture" with "archiagape" by combining ἀρχι- "chief" with ἀγάπη

agápē "love"? To be a Chief-lover is, of course, more desirable than being a Chief-creator. A Chief-lover is what every office in the profession urgently needs. And a Chief-lover is also what its many schools should wish to educate. Being an Archiagape would reflect well the love and care for both nature and society expressed by the contributors in *Ambiguous Territory*. Indeed, being a Chief-lover is what anyone trying to build for the betterment of society and the environment should aspire to be. So let's say farewell to Architecture and instead give a warm welcome to Archiagape.

That is not an entirely serious proposal, of course. I am just mirroring the ambiguities of this volume. To announce that you are the Chief-lover on the construction site would most certainly raise eyebrows, musings, and even a good laugh. That's the point, for without ambiguities, musings and humor there is no way forward in trying to address the social and environmental ills of our time.