



## TBA21: THE CURRENT— A MONUMENTAL SHIFT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

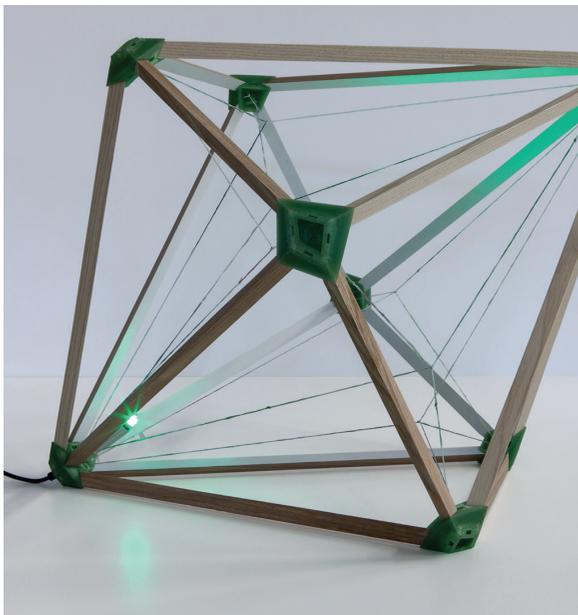
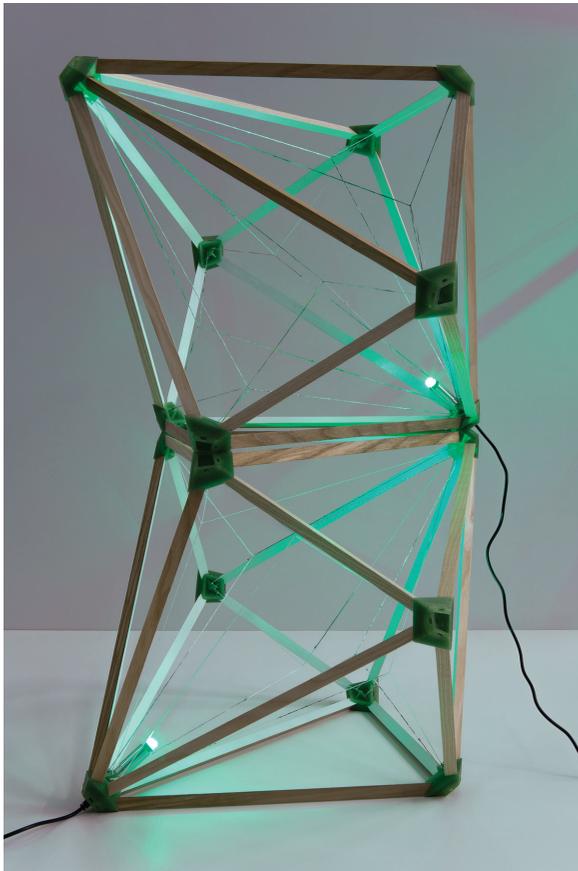
Words by Harry Seymour

*TBA21: The Current*, is a foundation set up by Swiss art collector, philanthropist and environmentalist Francesca von Habsburg, along with curator and activist Markus Reymann. Originally conceived as a 'floating academy' of sorts, TBA21 curates annual expeditions and gatherings of artists, scientists, curators and writers to establish collaborative projects on multidisciplinary projects that migrate around the world, in a bid to protect and sustain the world's oceans.

Contemporary art pioneer Francesca von Habsburg set up her foundation, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, in Austria over a decade ago, and it has quickly grown to be one of the most well-known and cutting-edge collections in Europe. It's reputation for commissioning projects that push the limits of what can be considered 'art,' and often with a 'social change activist' edge, it has attracted much attention for both the foundation and its founder. One such early project was Olafur Eliasson's *Green Light*, which sold small lamps to the public for €250 that had been hand assembled by refugees, amongst the flurry of a twenty-four-

hour programme of workshops on ideas of art, citizenship and migration. This latest project, *The Current* had been inspired by her escalating awareness of the increasing decline of ocean environments. Francesca has strong family ties to the island of Jamaica where she spent childhood holidays on her family's estate and now she returns with her own children. Having spent many years scuba diving the reefs, she noticed first-hand the speedy degradation of these underwater ecosystems and the impact it was having on both the underwater habitats and the local populations. In 2015 she decided to shift the focus of her foundation to tackle climate change.

*TBA21: The Current* is a small part of a wider wave of a trend happening right now in the contemporary art world, a trend towards sustainability and responsibility on both the part of the artist and the audience. Now that the heady mist is finally clearing, the money-crazed and self-obsessed art trends and markets that plagued the nineties and noughties are finally rearing their vulgarity. Artists, curators, collectors,



OLAFUR ELIASSON – GREEN LIGHT | AN ARTISTIC WORKSHOP  
 GREEN LIGHT – SHARED LEARNING  
 TBA21 – AUGARTEN  
 PHOTOGRAPHY: SANDRO E.E. ZANZINGER / TBA21, 2016

critics and the public are now looking for something with morality—something that tries to have an effect for the good of the world. *TBA21* is doing such, taking art out of the studio and science out the lab, bringing the two together to establish a new paradigm for how we understand and act on environmental issues. Collaborative ideas between the disciplines are explored on the *Dardanella*, a research vessel funded by the foundation that sails the oceans, and at the annual foundation meetings, where researchers come together before and after expeditions to discuss their collaborative projects, brainstorm, evaluate and dream.

The first research venture was undertaken in 2015, set up by international curator and director of the Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, Ute Meta Bauer. Bauer led an excursion of artists and scientists on the *Dardenella* to Papua New Guinea to run a series of projects working with the local environment and communities, such as examining their sharing culture mixed with UN rules on ocean-drilling through interpretive dance, and looking at their raft-building traditions through contemporary architecture practises. The next voyage will be in June 2016 to French Polynesia. In March 2016, the previous and future trip's members met in Jamaica, along with a roster of other artists, scientists and curators working via ecology and preservation. The programme included thematic discussion tables on ideas of responsible philanthropy and using less plastic, outreach programmes with local school children building kites from refuse, and talks by established artists such as the London and Paris-based Lucy Orta. She spoke about her *OrtaWater* series that consists of sculptures constructed of manual water purification methods whilst pumping water from the canals of Venice or the Huang Pu River in China into the gallery and making it drinkable for the audience. Lucy is one half of the Orta duo. Along with her husband Jorge, she creates work which focuses on migration, food, water and environment, and is a prime example of this shift in the focus of art to an educational and responsible method of inspiring.

Some of the other participants in Jamaica included the London-based architect, artist and researcher Nabil Ahmed, whose work explores the contemporary status of nature in spatial relation to law, conflict and development, who spoke about the ecocide of Papua New Guinea; and the multidisciplinary artist Laura Anderson Barbata, who collaborated with the National Dance Theatre of Jamaica to present a performance on gifting economies and social artistic rituals on Pacific Islands. Their research was presented then discussed as an on-going art project that could help explain their causes, while opening the floor to ideas about how they could be developed to help protect the environmental and social issues of their subjects.

Other projects initiated by *TBA21* include the groundbreaking *Treasure of Lima*, which saw a physical treasure chest of artworks being buried off Isla del Coco, some 550 kilometres off the coast of Costa Rica. The chest, designed by the architect duo Arranda/Lasch, contains works by artists such as Marina Abramovich, Loafar



EXHIBITION IN JAMAICA



ORTAWATER



ORTAWATER



Eliasson, Pierre Huyghe, Matthew Ritchie, Doug Aitken, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, Ed Ruscha, Angela Bulloch and Lawrence Weiner. The treasure map (a set of GPS coordinates) was encrypted and turned into a sculpture by Dutch-artist, Constant Dullart. The work emphasises the idea that the ocean is both our eternal keeper, as well as our eternal sustainer. TBA21 also discovered a new species of bioluminescent turtles in 2015 as part of an undertaking between National Geographic oceanographers and artists working together to document underwater scenes using new technologies. The *Alligator Head Marine Laboratory* and *East Portland Fish Sanctuary* were also opened this year in Jamaica to research and restore local underwater ecosystems, utilising science and art together with both local and international communities to protect habitats for future generations.

TBA21 is working to push the elastic boundaries of what constitutes an art exhibition. The work is confined by neither time nor space, and the journey is cited as the product. Yet the more challenging aspect is perhaps defining the results, which are measurable by the impact the work can have on the audience, who themselves become part of the project, spreading the message and taking physical steps to help protect the planet.

It seems that the myriad of recently established charities, think tanks and NGOs are straining themselves to establish new and exciting ways with which to utilise the arts to further social causes. A recent example being the Turner Prize-

winning architectural team that works to revamp rundown social housing estates, turning the fortunes and favour of both local communities and the prize itself. The move is perhaps part of a wider societal shift toward dealing with the ever-present issues of war, famine and global warming with which we find ourselves in the presence of every day through widespread media exposure. Our social consciences are catching up on the collaborative power of multidisciplinary work.

The only concern now, when delving into this unexplored territory, is establishing the line between true compassion and a cashing-in, vanity project. Fortunately, it is harder to trick the empirical eye of a scientist as opposed to the subjective eye of an art audience.

TBA21 is commissioning and disseminating the types of ideas that can, and will, inspire people—they are humanising the work of the scientists, turning the graphs, charts and statistics into a creative output that appeals to the heart and not just the mind. They are capitalising on the power of artists to turn raw data into beauty, weaving the narrative of the science into something less tangible, but with more raw and emotive power—and proving both sets of products from science and art are equally as important. The project is establishing a sharing culture where everyone becomes part of the research and the outcome, working together to protect the planet for ourselves and future generations.