

AFTER ZERO-SUM: SERENITY FOR DEMOCRACY

JOANNA POPE *with* AUDREY TANG

It's strange to remember Barcelona, Decode, Bria's speech at the summit. While that moment certainly shaped the world we have now, it was also a very different one for Europe. The continent still seemed to have some sort of gravitational pull then. As the revolution of cities spread, of course, this changed. Europe waned like never before. Nothing to mourn though. No green deal would have lived up to its promises if the global power balance had remained untouched. These days, things seem to revolve around Asia, even if we aren't able to spend much time there physically—though the train ride is supposed to be wonderful now.

Looking back, we were already spending a lot of virtual time in Taiwan in the 2020s, much of it as an eager audience for Audrey Tang. Many of us know Audrey Tang as The New Serenity's foremost digital peacekeeper. But Taiwan's former digital minister was a progenitor of the democratic Serenity infrastructure itself.

Earlier this year, we spoke to Tang during one of her (now legendary) collaborative office hours, hosted in a lofty airplane hangar in Taipei that housed her Social Innovation Lab. Even on our end of the call, the vast open space was imposing. It might have just been our connection, but we wondered whether we were speaking to Tang's avatar—the holographic projection that she uses to give all those television interviews for news stations around the world that you've no doubt seen.

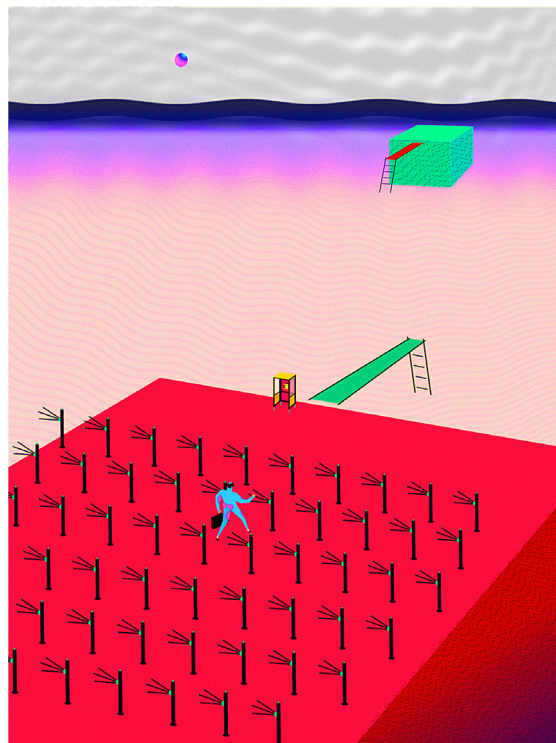
Perhaps Tang wasn't in Taipei then, but in Caracas, or London. Or in both places at once. We knew she would have told us if we asked, but for some reason we didn't. We were in awe, we suppose. In any case, true to Tang's principles of radical transparency, our conversation was streamed to a public broadcast. What follows are a few selected excerpts of our interview, which lasted well over five hours.

A lot has changed between now and ten years ago. Has there been a paradigm shift in the way we think about democratic infrastructure since 2025?

Certainly. Throughout the twenties, it was still very common to think about direct democracy and representative democracy in binary terms, as two competing forms of participation. In Taiwan, we had already begun prototyping a new political system that challenged this binary, and explored how direct and representative democracy could work symbiotically, as interwoven, complementary systems. What is remarkable about this dual infrastructure of participatory and representative democracy is the way in which very different political systems have converged on this model, from former authoritarian states to liberal democracies. Of course, approaches vary across countries and cities.

What is unique about the approach in Taiwan?

We work with a simple system of quadratic voting where people vote according to the degree or strength of their preferences, rather than just voting for or against something. In a system where people only have a limited number of votes the uploaded informa-



Wong Ping, *The Other Side*, 2015.

tion is just not sufficient. You'll always end up facing Arrow's paradox. By switching to quadratic voting, people can save up their votes and use them for the issues that they know the most about, and they have also come to appreciate how much they can learn from the others' analysis of political issues. With this market of votes, you're able to distribute a political budget fairly and sustainably.

What was the most significant contribution of the digital in the transformation of democratic infrastructure, in your opinion?

The digital was crucial for finding better ways to facilitate dialogue and work toward common understandings between different actors and different groups. By leveraging quantum computing, these fine-tuned virtual conversations allow us to voice our fears and doubts, to clear up misunderstandings, and to ensure we're really listened to.

Can you speak about the use of these technologies in the Internet of Beings? You were involved in this too, weren't you?

Yes. Obviously, it's not democracy if only humans are involved. The Internet of Beings is a form of democracy that includes rivers, mountains, animals and other nonhumans, giving these agents a political voice via an avatar. The radically different approach to ecological justice by cities using the Inter-

net of Beings is a testament to this approach.

Of course, one of the biggest challenges lies ahead of us still. We'll need to give a political voice to all the future generations of humans and nonhumans who are yet to exist. This will mean radically improving quantum simulations in order to develop working avatars. It's all somewhat experimental at this point, but I'm hopeful that we'll have made a breakthrough by 2045 at least.

You have previously described our post-crisis transition as a transition to a positive-sum world. What do you say to Serenity critics, who allege that the world is still very much zero-sum?

For them, maybe. That's because they're still stuck playing game theory. In the bad old days of the zero sum world, people think there are limited resources to compete over with a win-lose mechanism. And those who have lost have to make it a lose-lose mechanism to get their revenge. With quadratic voting, along with quadratic funding and other methods developed in the the RadicalXchange movement, you're able to start playing reverse game theory—that is, mechanism design. Once you turn mechanism design into a participatory game, the creativity spreads. People start to devise their own games that are win-win for everyone involved.

If they detect a win-lose dynamic, people will simply turn it into a game, working together to develop a better mechanism instead of focusing their energy on making other people lose so that they can win.

Do these new ways of thinking and living amount to a transformation in our imaginary?

I would argue that they do. In short: The idea of creating an alternate governance system is no longer something you would have to rent an island for. It's something you can do right now, in the communities that already exist around you.

AUDREY TANG continued to develop free software, searching for new ways of communicating and conversing about problems. The first popular one, "Common Grounds" from 2023 was able to synthesise discussions towards the most profitable outcome for all involved. The breakthrough was in 2025 when she shared a software based in the quantum realm called "Face to Face" which was first operated by the Taiwanese government to facilitate political discourse. In later updates it became so effective that it was quickly adapted by administrations all over the world. From 2029 onwards Tang was overseeing "The Identity System", responsible for global peacekeeping and political discourse (in the digital).