

Parergon



At this moment in time I am reminded of a comment made by exiled Iranian artist Rokni Haerizadeh at Art Dubai's Global Art Forum in 2014, when articulating his quizzical search for new definitions of his art practice – of paintings, their surreal imagery sourced from the globally pervasive media news cycle, where the presence of human beings has been literally wiped out, sublimated by layers of paint and ink negating and corrupting the surface of the printed video still, mutating their human figures into human-animal hybrids in unsettling and savage scenes of the familiar and the bizarre, where both perpetrator and victim have become these cross-beasts, metaphors of a social world turned inhuman – he equated the process and its product to being the “the skin off our time.” The series of artworks in discussion was *Fictionville* (2009–), rotoscope video works made from thousands of individual paintings, that probed the pervasive normativity of social and cultural models presented by world institutions, society neither utopian nor dystopian, through an interrogatory of picking away at the layers of institutional order. This maxim comes to mind now, mid-point (perhaps) of a globally consuming coronavirus, of *Fictionville*'s prescient phantasm – of distrust, doubt, of personal and collective human anxiety and disorder at real or imagined fault-lines in society, authority, and history. Whereas Haerizadeh's focus was of human generated behaviour, of violence to itself – now recurrent, leading to more than cancellation of biennales – and to the animal world, that world is now additionally entangled by an animal, or perhaps human-animal generated contagion that's effecting the world *in toto*: the title of the above painting from that series being most apt, *Life is Perhaps That Enclosed Moment when My Vision Destroys Itself in the Pupil of Your Eyes*.

I have highlighted elsewhere the latter-day positionings of biennales *et al.*, through their titles and themes, that declare a mutual apriorism of art's redemptive qualities to rescue humanity from apathy or ignorance, neutrality or complicity, of its many perceived or certain travails; feasibly, art as panacea, remedy or atonement. The 2019 Singapore Biennale, 2020 Dhaka Art Summit, 2020 Biennale of Sydney and 2020 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, collectively the focus of the previous issue, and this, as constituents of the endangered global artistic-industrial complex (Paul Gladston), have both confronted and been confronted by the global pandemic and its ensuing reverberations. The 2019 Biennale of Singapore: *Every Step in the Right Direction*, presented a mix of hope and optimism, of placing "faith squarely in the potential of art and its understanding," querying the "responsibility of the artwork" to "transmute" (mutate?) this "troubled" world, the Biennale escaping the coronavirus but not its concluding conference. Also initiated pre-COVID-19, the Dhaka Art Summit perceptively presented the multiple notions of "seismic movements" (Diana Campbell Betancourt), while the Biennale of Sydney: *NIRIN*, untimely interrupted at its inception, exposed urgent states of the contemporary condition, evidencing the power of artists to "resolve, heal, dismember and imagine futures of transformation for re-setting the world" (Andrew Renton and Brook Andrew). Fusing such reflections in this issue are others, where history both underscores and accentuates: the year 2020 presents the 250th anniversary of British explorer Lt. James Cook's Pacific Ocean voyage of "discovery" that claimed the continent of Terra Australis for the British Empire, the consequences of which still resonate (Una Rey); the 75th anniversary of the nuclear bombings of Japan that ended the Pacific War (Reuben Keehan); and an imaginery 'summit' to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's visionary policy of *Wawasan 2020* (Yao Souchou); the long and winding narrative arc of Pepe the Frog meme, from feelgood adoration to alt-right appropriation, to Hong Kong democracy protesters' mascot (Stephanie Bailey); third world manual labour in age of global capital (Murtaza Vali); the politically-astute, gender-diverse artist representation for the New Zealand pavilion at the COVID-19-delayed 2022 Venice Biennale (Andrew Wood); and diaspora, (trans)nationalism and the plurality of memory (Genevieve Trail).

The 2020 Kochi-Muziris Biennale, broadly the focus of this issue's compass, presents an equally resolute optimism as per its biennale colleagues, given the criticality and cataclysm of this moment in time. To quote at length curator Shubigi Rao's note for her 2020 Kochi-Muziris Biennale: *In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire*:

As a bulwark against despair the biennale as commons may seem an impossible idea. But we remember the ability of our species, our communities, to flourish artistically even in fraught and dire situations, with a refusal in the face of disillusionment to disavow our poetry, our languages, our art and music, our optimism and humour. To envision this biennale as a persistent yet unpredictable murmuration in the face of capriciousness and volatility comes from my unshakeable conviction in the power of storytelling as strategy, of the transgressive potency of ink, and transformative fire of satire and humour... This edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale therefore embodies the joy of experiencing practices of divergent sensibilities, under conditions both joyful and grim. There is optimism even in the darkest absurdity, and this is what leavens the direness of our time... we can imagine the possibility of sustained kinship, and remember that we are not isolated in this fight. And that perhaps all that is required for an impossible ideal to exist is for enough people to live, think, and work as if it already does.

The skin off our time.