UC Berkeley
UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title
Would the Peepal Marry?

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75g076wf

Journal
TAKE on India, 3(1)

Author
Ray, SUGATA

Publication Date
2017-01-15

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1, JANUARY - JUNE, 2017 Rs. 250

TAKE

ON INDIA

RNI No. DELENG/2015/60525

ecology

TJ DEMOS – Creative Ecologies – page 018

WOOD ROBERDEAU – A Withdrawing Vital Material – page 022

GULAMMOHAMMED SHEIKH & BHAVNA KAKAR – Non-Anthropocentric Metaphors of Civilisation – page 034

ORON CATTS & IONAT ZURR – Compost, Metabolism and Semi-Living Animal Proteins – page 050

TAKE
editions

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

Contents

09 Editor's Note – Bhavna Kakar

Take / Ecology

010 Title: *The Body of the Crime*
Author: Nabil Ahmed

014 Title: *Future Imaginaries for when the World Feels like Heartbreak*
Author: Heather Davis

018 Title: *Creative Ecologies*
Author: T. J. Demos

022 Title: *A Withdrawing Vital Material*
Author: Wood Roberdeau

030 Title: *Would the Peepal Marry?*
Author: Sugata Ray

034 Title: *Non-Anthropocentric Metaphors of Civilisation*
Author: Bhavna Kakar interview with Gulammohammed Sheikh

039 Title: *Three Traces of Nature and Self*
Author: Ravi Agarwal

042 Title: *Food in the Metabolic Era : The Death of the Experiment*
Author: Chus Martínez

050 Title: *Compost, Metabolism and Semi-living Animal Proteins*
Author: Oron Catts & Ionat Zurr

054 Title: *Autogastronomy: Your Body is a Restaurant*
Author: The Center for Genomic Gastronomy

058 Title: *How Clean is Dirty and Dirty Clean?*
Author: Ana María Bresciani

063 Title: *Aesth-ethics: Towards Blending Ecology, Justice, and Art*
Author: Ashish Kothari and Radhika Mulay

066 Title: *The Ontology of the Circle Speak*
Author: Elin Már Øyen Vister

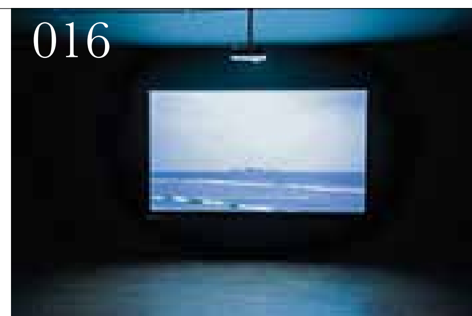
070 Title: *Aerocene: a Quasi-feasible Utopia*
Author: Stefanie Hessler interview with Tomás Saraceno, Bronislaw Szerszynski & Sasha Engelmann

075 Title: *Three Theses on the Sublime*
Author: D. Graham Burnett

076 Title: *We would not Call Ourselves Trilobite*
Author: Liv Bugge

080 Title: *A Good Harvest*
Author: Kamayani Sharma

084 Title: *Artist as the Witness and Art as Evidence in the 'Last Political Scene'*
Author: Mario D'Souza


016

033

056

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

TAKE Pick

088 Title: *India Art Fair 2017*
Author: TAKE Team

127 Title: *#throwbackKMB2016*
Author: Gopal Mirchandani

Interview

092 Title: *Requiem for the Apocalypse*
Author: Adwait Singh & AES+F

102 Title: *The Mythology of Choice*
Author: Owais Husain & Fernanda Garcia

Book Review

105 Title: *Reset*
Author: Paroma Maiti

International Review

106 Title: *Object Lessons*
Author: Tausif Noor

Review

107 Title: *Trans-subjectivity of Jalāl and Jamāl*
Author: John Xaviers

108 Title: *A City of Cities*
Author: Gopika Nath

110 Title: *Regarding Embodiment*
Author: Ritika Kochhar

111 Title: *Of Articulations, Anticipations, Propositions and Processes: Inquiries on the Contemporary*
Author: Jyothidas K. V.

113 Title: *Illusions of a Bewildering Reality*
Author: Ramya Sharma

114 Title: *Queering the Landscape*
Author: Katharina Domscheit-D'souza

115 Title: *Tranquility of Antithesis*
Author: Himanshu Kadam

Report

118 Title: *The Medium and the Message : Unbinding the Book*
Author: Chloé Wolifson

124 Title: *Conversation with the Community*
Author: Rita Datta

Photo Essay

130 Title: *Fly on the Wall #19*
Author: Manisha Gera Baswani

093

108

122

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

Sugata Ray

would the peepal marry?

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

Sugata Ray is the assistant professor of South Asian art and architecture in the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley. His research and writing focuses on the intersections among early modern and colonial artistic cultures, transterritorial ecologies, and the natural environment. Recent publications include essays in journals such as *The Art Bulletin*, *South Asia*, and *Art History* and chapters in books on critical eco art histories. He is currently completing a monograph on environmental aesthetics in a Hindu pilgrimage center in India and coediting two volumes on transregional eco art histories.

Left side image: Unknown photographer, Kirumbala tribal group, Nilgiri hills, albumen print, ca. 1860. Image © V&A Images/Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Sentient plant life, it seems, is everywhere. From the Ents of the Middle-earth who, in J R R Tolkien's world, battle with the catastrophic forces of large-scale deforestation to rumors of Aishwarya Rai ritually marrying a peepal tree before her wedding to Abhishek Bachchan in order to counter the negative effects of an adverse planetary constellation. Notions of paradise and desecration, utopia and dystopia, biophilia and biophobia permeate our lives. Amitabh Bachchan, of course, denounced the rumors of Aishwarya Rai's nuptial by asserting that even acknowledging that trees have sentience was irrational and a sign of cognitive failure. They, that is the Bachchans, were not an irrational family. With his famous deadpan demeanor, the actor—who François Truffaut once described as a one-man industry—declared: "Unless you think Abhishek is a tree."[1]

Bachchan's unease on being identified as superstitious is, of course, not surprising. For, by the late 19th century, the pathologies of colonial anthropology had already defined animism as a particular infantile mentality of the primitive (read colonised) who is not able to rationally distinguish the animate from the inanimate. Summarising E. B. Tylor's foundational

James Waterhouse, Sanchi Stupa, albumen print, ca. 1850. Published in James Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship, or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the First and Fourth Centuries after Christ*, Plate V. Image © V&A Images/Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

schematisation of primitive cultures, Émile Durkheim would thus write: "Now the primitive thinks like a child. Consequently, he is also inclined to endow all things, even inanimate ones, with a nature analogous to his own."[2] By the early twentieth century, anthropology, imperial photography, history writing, natural resource management, and the bureaucracies of colonial governance had decisively fabricated the ostensible animistic tribes of India who purportedly existed in harmony with nature as living remnants of Europe's evolutionary past.

For the most part, the childlike figure of the tribal lived in harmony with other-than-human persons such as trees and animals in the conceptual registers of late 19th and early 20th century anthropology. In turn, in collusion with colonial anthropology, antiquarians set out to unravel this so-called tribal mentality by highlighting fantastic relationships between architecture and animism. Thus, if we examine the unexpectedly interconnected roots and branches that linked the indigo planter and antiquarian James Fergusson, the German archaeologist Karl Bötticher, and the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer, among other figures, we become aware of the strong presence of an architectural imagination in colonial ethnologies of animism or tree worship. Architecture, according to such accounts, was not only enclosures of animate activity but were themselves animated. Indeed, long before the institution of the disciplinary paradigms of architecture history, Fergusson's *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868) commenced with a discussion on animistic tree worship at the Buddhist sites of Sanchi and Amaravati. Richly illustrated with

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

Standing Buddha from Sarnath, sandstone, 476/477 CE. Collection: Archaeological Museum, Sarnath. Photo credit: Frederick M. Asher.

Detail, Standing Buddha from Jamalpur, sandstone, mid-fifth century CE. Collection: Government Museum, Mathura. Mathura. Photo credit: Frederick M. Asher.

photographs of sculpted reliefs depicting tree worship, Fergusson's objective in the text was to demonstrate that animism was not just 'totems of a local Indian tribe' but was part of a "religious development that at one time overshadowed the world with its strange fetishisms."[3]

At one level, here the 'one time' conveys the messy issue of colonial temporality. Fergusson ends his introductory thesis with late 19th century instances of animism in India, in effect making Europe's past and India's colonial present unambiguously coeval. The colonising undertone of such a temporal placement was certainly strategic. But, at another level, Fergusson's arguments were part of a larger imperial rhetoric on forests and the non-rational animistic worlds of forest peoples who had to be brought under the fold of modernity and evangelical Christianity.[4]

Despite his rancorous colonialist views, Fergusson does however open up the possibility of an ecological art and architecture history of South Asia that introduce the "knots of ordinary multispecies living on earth."[5] My own interest in the sentience of plant life, though, is aligned with a specific turn in art history that emerged in the early 20th century, a turn that brought to the fore new capacious intersubjective paradigms that were grounded outside the realm of post-Enlightenment rational thought but were squarely located within an anti-colonial practice of art history. For instance, already by the 1920s, Fergusson's imperialist rhetoric had started receiving widespread criticism. The harshest response came from the Jewish émigré Stella Kramrisch, who had arrived in India in 1921 after completing her doctoral dissertation on early Buddhist art in Vienna.

The Tagores had mediated Kramrisch's engagement with the nationalist circles in Calcutta after she was invited in 1921 to join Kala Bhavan, the art school in Santiniketan. Stella Kramrisch delivered a series of lectures on European art from the Gothic to Dadaism in Kala Bhavan. Subsequently, she joined the University of Calcutta in 1923 as the first professor of Indian art history at the request of Asutosh Mukherjee, the then vice-chancellor of the university. Immediately, she confronted the question of trees and plants in Indian art. Against the backdrop of colonial art historiography, Kramrisch's 1933 *Indian Sculpture* read the slender male body in Buddhist sculpture as plant life.

The fifth-century Buddhist body, Kramrisch proposed, was an effect of transubstantiation that resulted when the vegetal migrated into the body. Noting the lack of botanical decorative motifs in late fifth century Buddhist sculptures, Kramrisch wrote: "The body becomes plant-like in swaying rhythm and plasticity; it is the vessel of the movement of the physical and of inner life. The human body does not stand for physical appearance. It is the form of movement of life."[6] Indeed, unlike earlier sculptures of the Buddha with elaborately ornamented nimbuses with radiating lotus petals, effusive floral scrolls, garlands, and rosettes, late fifth century sculptures of the Buddha were relatively unembellished. The body, Kramrisch proposed, had become plant life, the human and the vegetal irrevocably intertwined into one body pulsating with vibrant energy. Moving away from the logo-centricism of earlier colonial writing, Kramrisch then explored an art history that did not measure the sculpted form in human terms.

Might the resignification of the human body as plant life, a direct reversal of colonial logocentricim, provide an entry point for thinking the vegetal in the archives of art and architecture? Might we be able to mobilise Kramrisch's schema, at least to some extent, to alter the symbiotic

Copyright TAKE on art magazine. Published in TAKE Ecology (January-June 2017)

Artist unknown, *The Canton Waterfront (Guangzhou, China)*, watercolor on pith paper, ca. 1850. Image © V&A Images/Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Francis Frith, *Elphinstone Circle Gardens*, Bombay (Mumbai), albumen print, ca. 1850. Image © V&A Images/Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

relationship between plant and human life beyond the phallocentric logic of post-Enlightenment reason? We are all too familiar with colonial cityscapes that stretched from the European factories in Shamian Island in Canton (Guangzhou) to Bombay (Mumbai), where the shade of carefully maintained trees provided a specific ecological regime of governance and control over the natural world. But what might transpire if trees resist human control, reject the demands of anthropocentric exceptionalism? What performative force might such a conception of personhood open up? Within such an altered human-nonhuman framework, would the peepal care to marry us?

1 "Ash never got married to a tree," *The Times of India*, Jun 23, 2007.
2 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. by Joseph W. Swain. New York: Dover Publications, 2008, 53.
3 James Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship, or Illustrations of Mythology and Art in India in the First and Fourth Centuries after Christ*. London: W H Allen & Co., 1868, 84.
4 See Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers, and Wildness in Western India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
5 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 3.
6 Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933, 55.

Image courtesy: Sugata Ray.