

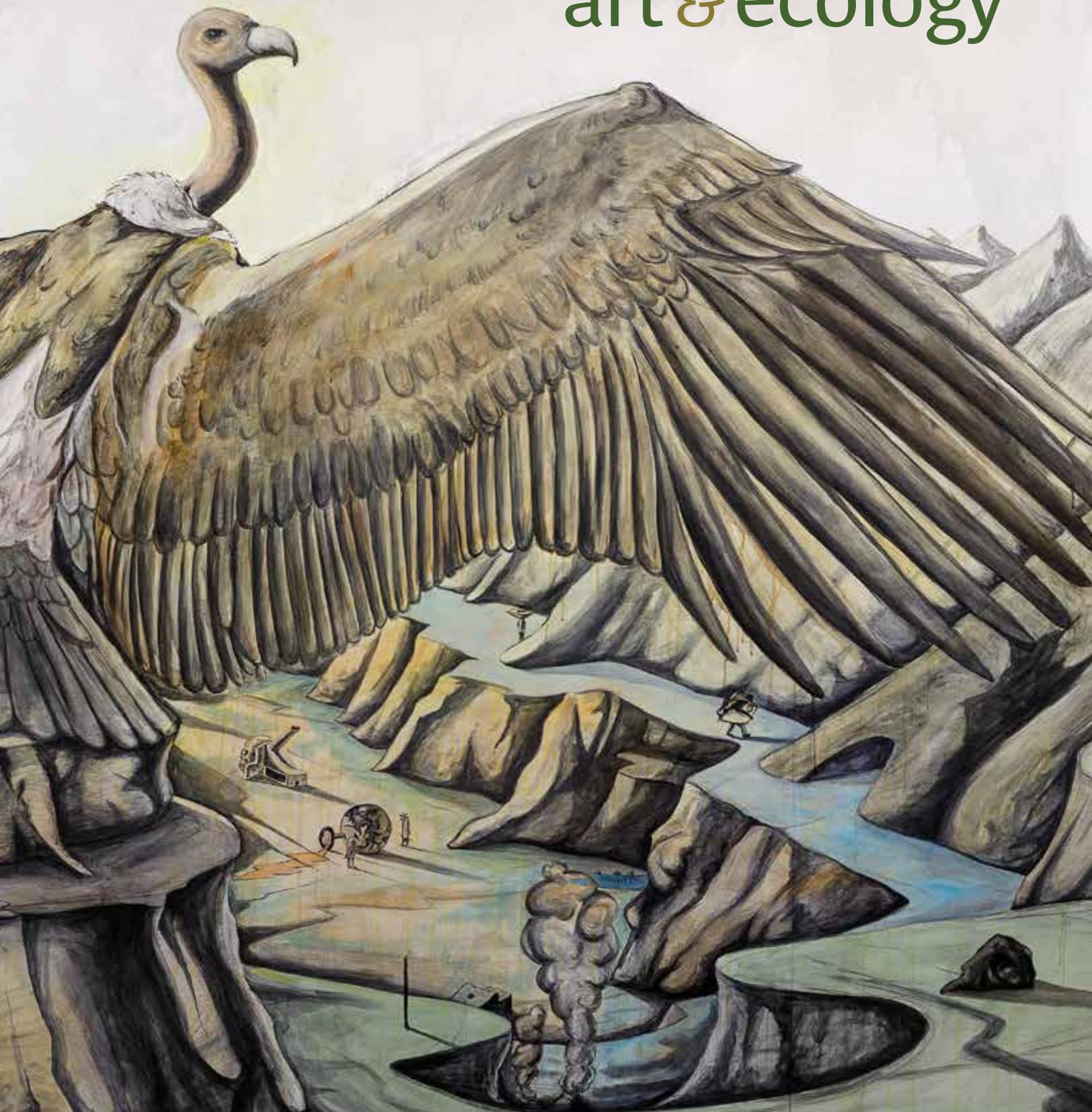
# MARG

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art & ecology



## Art & Ecology

EDITED BY RAVI AGARWAL AND LATIKA GUPTA

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NOOPUR DESAI

(Cover) Detail from *The Relic of Our Time*, Prabhakar Pachpute, 2020. Watercolour and acrylic paint on canvas; (full work) 213.3 x 487.6 cm. Courtesy Experimenter, Kolkata.

The artist visualizes the dystopian ecologies we inhabit. Rampant land mining, pesticide usage and exploitation of natural resources have threatened the survival of species such as the vulture that surveys the devastated landscape and mutated beings in Pachpute’s work.



14



40



68



70



95



# Introduction

RAVI AGARWAL AND LATIKA GUPTA

**1**  
*The Yamuna Series II*, Sheba Chhachhi, 2005.  
 Digital print on duratrans; 50 x 101 cm.  
 Courtesy the artist.  
 The work refers to the destruction of the Yamuna whose banks have been taken over by toxic landfill and rampant construction.

**2**  
*The State Relief Packages*, Prabhakar Pachpute, 2013.  
 Charcoal and pastel on paper; 152.4 x 198.1 cm. Courtesy IFA Stuttgart & Berlin and Clark House Initiative, Mumbai.  
 The work highlights the agrarian crisis in Maharashtra.

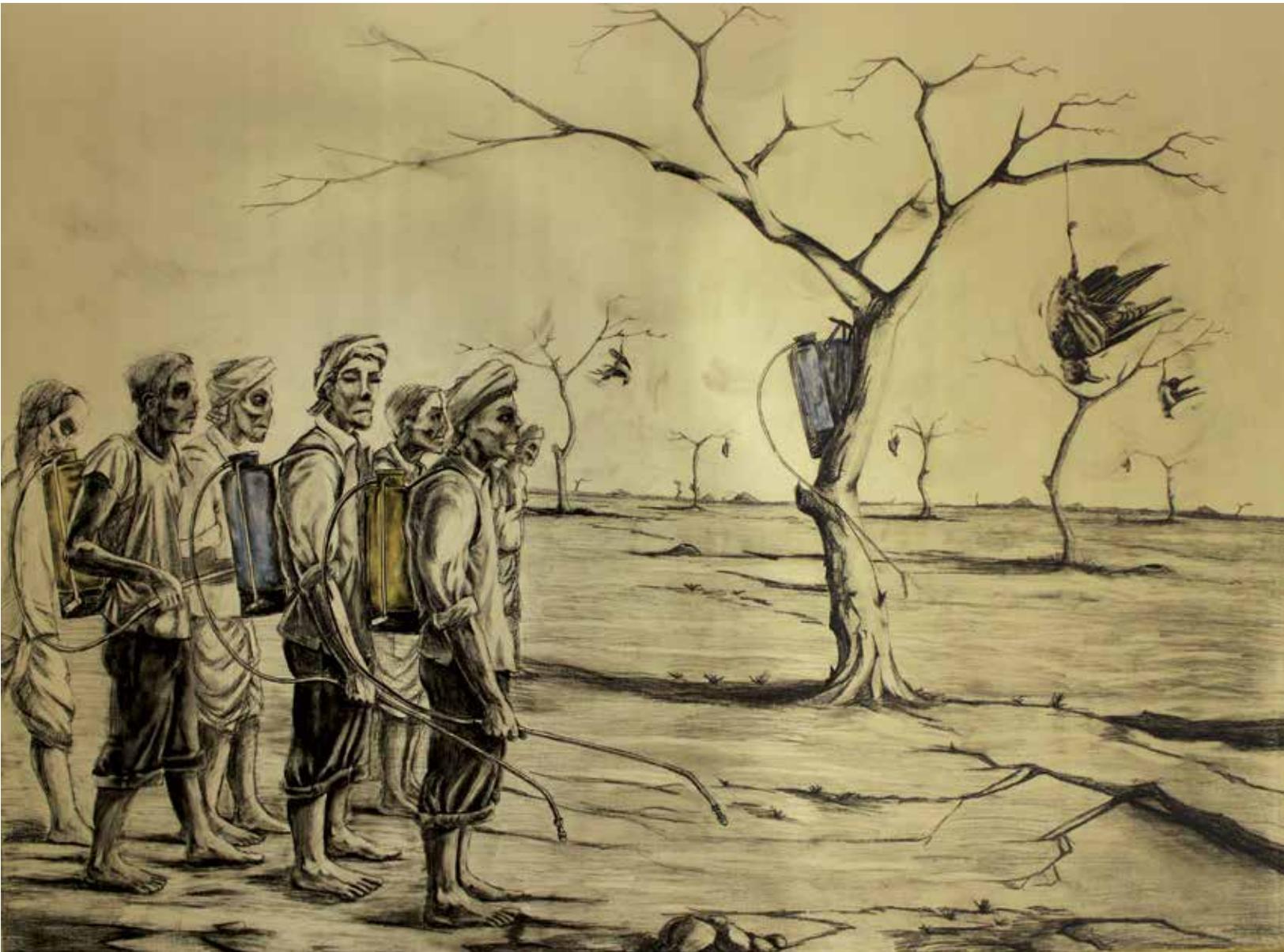
SEVERAL SCIENTIFIC INDICATORS ARE informing us that we are today at a planetary tipping point. The climate is changing, multiple species are becoming extinct, forests are depleting and we are carrying body burdens of toxic chemicals. A new vocabulary has emerged to describe this crisis—Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Plastioscene etc. are now common parlance in activist and academic discourses. These are relatively recent events in terms of planetary timescales. At this point in human history, when medicine has extended human life, when technology has made distant communication instant and rendered inter-planetary travel closer, we should have been at a moment of celebration. Instead we are hurtling towards an uncertain and bleak future.

The “ecological crisis”, as it is referred to, is foundational and calls into question everything we stand upon as human societies today. Arguably

“nature” is the underpinning of our social, cultural and political systems, yet it has been excluded from the social contract. In fact, the current moment may be viewed not as a “crisis” but as a condition which has been long in the making, even though the term brings forth a sense of urgency.

Amar Kanwar, in his film *The Many Faces of Madness* (2000), tersely reminds us that “Delusion is defined as a state where a person has lost all sense of reality. When a person thinks for instance that he’s the master of nature and not a part of it, then you could call it as being in a state of acute delusion, with dangerous consequences.” Reclaiming this reality would imply factoring nature back into everything from which it has been excluded thus far. For too long has nature been exploited as if there were no limits. Wealth and natural resources are inextricably intertwined and control over them has been the cause of wars

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3  
*House of Opaque Water*,  
 Ranbir Kaleka, 2012.  
 Three-channel  
 projection with sound  
 (10 min 33 sec); 171.6 x  
 914.4 cm. Courtesy  
 the artist.  
 The work deals with  
 the loss of life and  
 habitation due to rising  
 waters and depleted  
 mangrove forests in the  
 Sundarbans.

4  
*Bhu-kha (Bhumi ki  
 Khurakh or Diet of the  
 Earth)*, Arunkumar  
 H.G., 2010. Digital print  
 on textile along with  
 ceramic dishes; 38.1 x  
 76.2 cm each. Courtesy  
 the artist.  
 The series uncovers  
 the hidden process  
 of chemicalization of  
 agriculture and food,  
 which impacts the  
 health of consumers.

and misery. Histories of colonization, nation-states, migrations, capital and technology, can all be reconfigured as those of nature-exclusions. Also, even though nature is not a universal or homogeneous category, it has been mobilized as the singular “other”, causing a breakdown of complex, multiple and diverse human-nature relationships and wreaking violence on the most vulnerable communities and nonhuman species, often in unseen ways.

South Asia has its own, specific, ongoing encounters and traditional relationships with nature and the emancipatory promise of modernity, with its own sets of dynamics to do with economic development, poverty reduction and exploitation of resources. Traditional knowledge systems possessed by indigenous peoples, for instance, suggest fundamentally different understandings of land, ecology, human and nonhuman relationships. They point towards a coexistence with the planet, a humbler relationship with it, which requires permissions for transgressing and taking from the earth; ways of being which seem totally foreign in the post-Enlightenment epistemologies of land as property, rights as individual (instead of communal) and nature as passive. In the latter framework “alienation” is pre-inscribed, while in the former, it is about a constant reciprocity and coexistence with nature. At its root, an idea of the “self” is

brought under question. Who are the “we” who inhabit the planet and what is our relationship to it? Opening up this question invites a host of new possibilities for carving out fresh relationships and new trajectories for the future. The crisis is as much one of the destruction of nature as it is of the “self”.

However, traditional human-nature relationships cannot be termed to be unproblematic per se. Even though they point towards an ontological “self” which favours mutual care over exploitation, it needs to be recognized that within them exist invisible but deeply embedded power structures of gender, caste or race. There are also other vexed and relatively unexplored questions of the inclusion of nonhuman “voices” as essential stakeholders.

Artists have always responded to nature. It has been their muse, their backdrop, or their metaphor of catastrophe. Indigenous art—paintings, music, performances and folklore—has invoked nature imbued in and impacting all aspects of life and livelihoods. Life was in and around nature, and this is reflected in myriad images of trees, forests and animals as a part of our everyday world. However, contemporary art, until recently, has been only sporadically reflective of nature’s changing condition and its foundational relationship with society. As with artists who were located in and responded from within feminist movements



in the 1960s, new practices are emerging from a deeper engagement with the cultural, political and historical dimensions of ecology. The impulses for such art practices are located outside the canons of traditional art history and are expressions of a defining moment of our times.

This issue of *Marg* attempts to provide a glimpse into some of these practices which have a longstanding artistic or academic position, and are helping shape and broaden the discourse around art and the politics of ecology. They contribute to finding new collaborative modes of working with communities most deeply affected by the ecological crisis. They seek other ways of connecting, seeing, thinking and asking questions to address the nature-culture divide and unravel complexities in ways that challenge classical disciplinary approaches. Art practices which are located in the discourse along with other disciplines of enquiry, ones that do not merely produce objects that circulate within commercial art world contexts, can carve out new understandings. The essays here also explore the recent curatorial turn to exhibitions as sites of investigation into cultural politics and localities of ecology, and the relationship between art, institutions and the politics of funding that underlie them.

For a new and sustainable future, many new axes of thought will need to be opened up.

Contemporary art, until recently, has been only sporadically reflective of nature's changing condition and its foundational relationship with society. As with artists who were located in and responded from within feminist movements in the 1960s, new practices are emerging from a deeper engagement with the cultural, political and historical dimensions of ecology.

This will need a shift from the current dominant techno-capital trajectory of geo-engineering the planet to investigating other, more fragile trajectories of micro-connections and ecosystem integrities. These seemingly ephemeral yet robust connections have to replace oppressive homogeneity with diversity and multiplicity. "Nature" will have to be (re)produced, not as something out there, but as integrally present in our everyday life. This is where art excels, finds its home and indeed may provide a way, even as it negotiates the potential pitfalls of commodifying ecological crises through the object-centricity of the art world. This issue, with its focus on art, offers new collaborative frameworks through the inclusion of multiple voices—artists, critical theorists, economists, social scientists—in a conversation that calls for a broader ethical and onto-epistemological shift, with the hope that it will be a harbinger of better times.