

Editorial

It is only fitting that the editorial board chose 'Risk' as the theme for the 2021 issue of Hybrid. Individuals and communities around the world have been grappling with the uncertainties produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the rules of normal life got upended for months on end. Our choices about how to modify our behavior and protect the health and safety of our loved ones depended on figuring out what medical advice to trust and which government guidelines to follow. We became experts in constantly assessing and managing risk in our everyday lives.

At the same time, there are other crises bearing down upon the present historical moment and vying for our attention. The urgency of the climate change catastrophe and the devastating impact on the earth's environment resonate particularly loudly. The crisis of democracy and rise of authoritarian rule, the damaging march of globalized capitalism and neoliberal economies, the onslaught of ill-planned urban expansion and ensuing shortages of housing and livelihoods, all are threats that demand action. Anticipating and negotiating with risk seems to have become a permanent condition of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century period that we live in. The sociologist Ulrich Beck came up with the concept of 'Risk Society'¹ to describe this world characterized by proliferating technological hazards and a pervasive sense of insecurity. Anthony Giddens argues this is a condition of 'reflexive modernity'² where societies are increasingly preoccupied with examining themselves and are oriented towards the future rather than the past. Both theorists highlight how our perceptions and evaluations of risk shape the types of intervention, social organization and knowledge claims that become dominant.

Risk is typically associated with terms like danger, fragility, loss and failure in its quotidian use, i.e. with negative forces that need to be controlled and worked against. Attempts to regulate risk usually privilege discourses of safety and predictability within education, art and scholarship. Yet there are other creative and affirmative meanings of risk which invoke agency, growth, transgression and transformation that also underpin the discursive vision for this year's issue. Without putting something on the line, without imagining radically different futures, how do we find a way out of the multiple crises of our social institutions? When one takes on a risk, one also assumes the responsibility that comes with it. It is the richness and mobile history of this term that we invited our contributors to explore and that they embrace fully within this volume.

Nudrat Kamal shares her insightful look at the literary genre of speculative science fiction and fantasy writing in South Asia. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century texts contained expressly anti-colonial, anti-capitalist themes, while most contemporary works are set in dark, dystopic worlds marked by corporate control, surveillance and environmental destruction. Even as they describe grim realities, Kamal shows, these writings provide hopeful visions of a just, equitable and habitable future for the planet where hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and region are subverted.

Gulraiz Khan takes up the challenge of re-imagining what the city of Karachi could look like if a viable public transit system was available to its residents. Tragic failures of planning and political paralysis have left the metropolis without the infrastructure it needs to thrive. His well-researched and painstakingly constructed maps extend a series of interconnected bus, rail and ferry lines across the city, offering a tantalizing reminder of how Karachi can be transformed if barriers to urban mobility are removed.

Palvashay Sethi's essay about the Black American comedian Richard Pryor invites us to think about the transgressive potential of laughter and of comedic traditions that dwell on taboo subjects. She deftly analyses Pryor's performances that used to be rife with seemingly off-color jokes, demonstrating the close association between his risqué humor and the risks of speaking bitter truths about racial politics, sex, death, and those living at the margins of society.

Niyati Dave and Manjiri Dube of Khoj write about their curatorial projects with communities living in conditions of urban precarity in New Delhi. They bring out the potential of socially engaged art to enable connections and conversations about gendered violence, abuse, displacement, and spatial inequalities, even as the fragile nature of such interventions highlight their ethical responsibilities as curators. A photo-essay by the Pak Khawateen Painting Club documents the devastation wrought upon lands and people by ambitious infrastructure projects. Part performance and part ethnographic inquiry, the group's second expedition (the first one was to mega-dams in the north of the country) takes them to the lower reaches of the River Indus which has been tamed by a series of barrages, and makes them question the ecological costs imposed in the name of national progress.

In the section on crafts and artisanship, Babar N. Sheikh takes us on an intimate journey to an old Karachi neighborhood and down memory lane with the owner of a small family-owned business that has managed to survive amidst rising commercialization, mechanization and mass production. The shop is celebrated for its *bakarkhani*, a baked confectionery item made using a recipe and an arduous hand-crafting process that the family has perfected over six decades. Syed Safdar Ali's essay for the student section also contains a poignant rumination on memory and loss in the face of exploitative capitalism and urban development. He recounts how water

used to be a collectively shared resource in the small town of Tando Jam in Sindh and turned into a privatized good, unequally available to all, without any protest or lament being registered by the town residents.

The process of putting this issue together has itself been a risky endeavor that came together amid turbulence and uncertainty. The journal took a one-year gap during the pandemic and by the time I asked new members to join the editorial team, we were already confronting tight deadlines and additional responsibilities. I am grateful to all of them for saying yes and for being wonderful, thoughtful collaborators, as well as to our designer Kiran Ahmad for putting up with us through this madcap journey. I couldn't have asked for a more satisfying beginning to my time at the Indus Valley School.

Faiza Mushtaq
Editor, *Hybrid 04* | Risk

Notes

1. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. (London: Sage Publications, 1992).
2. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991).