

BREAKING GROUND

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In this issue, we look at corporeality through the lens of urbanity. Architectural disruptions in space, cityscapes are urban interventions that challenge the collective imaginary. We examine where architecture meets nature and where nature meets architecture.

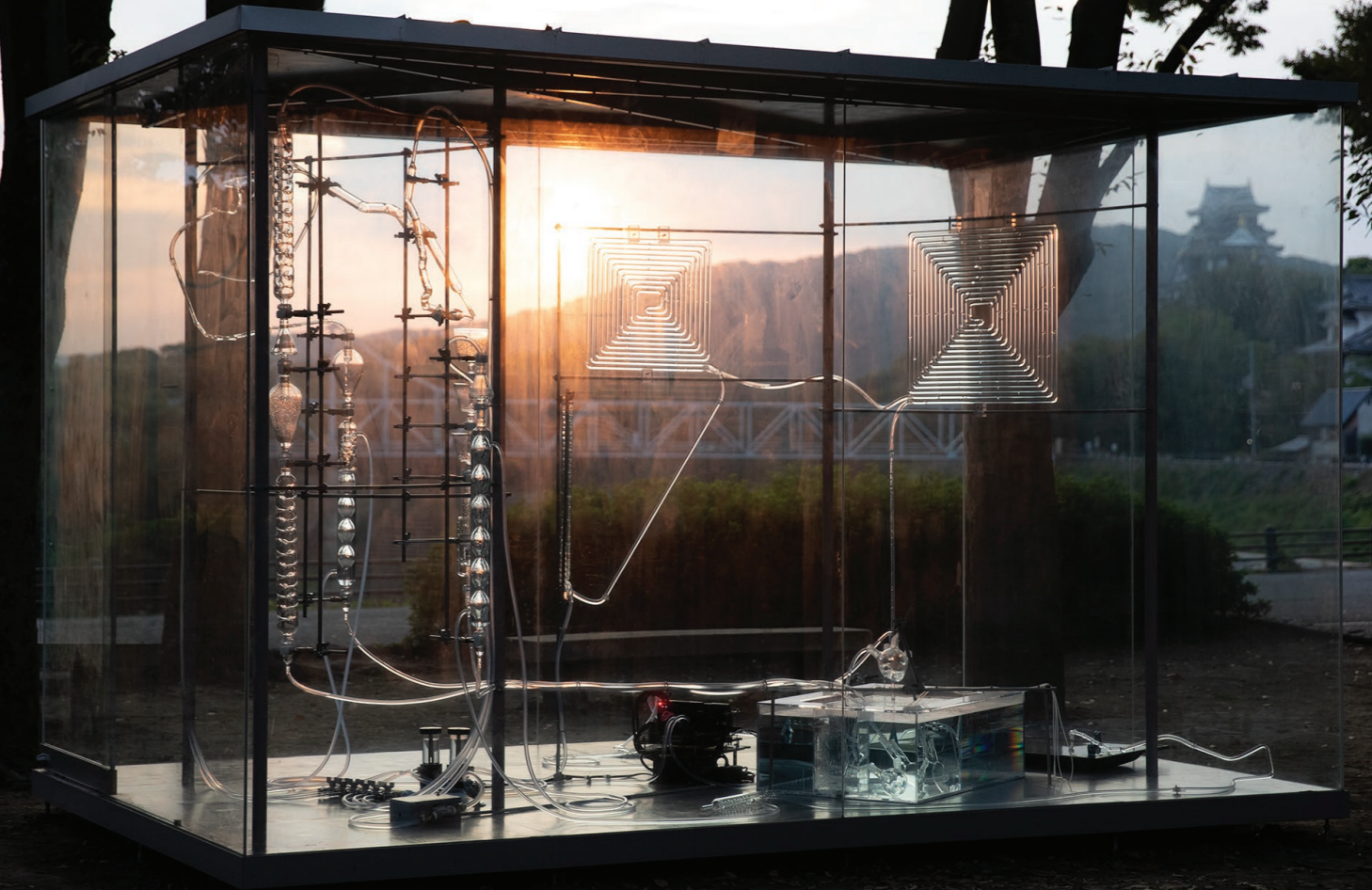
Isaac Julien. *A Marvellous Entanglement*. 2019.
Coloured and blue foils mounted on dibond 84.4 x
112.9 cm. Image courtesy of Galerie Ron Mandos

STRANGE NEW WORLD

The artist-led **Okayama Art Summit** is a triennial whose second iteration (ended 26 November) animated the city's historical sites in a dystopic setting of environmental desolation, biomimicry, algorithms and artificiality. At the helm was artistic director **Pierre Huyghe**, a giant in the field of human and non-human intelligence, and the works he showcased were an eclectic and immersive inquiry of the human and the machine.

Words by Payal Uttam

Foreground: Pamela Rosenkranz. *Skin Pool (Oromom)*. 2019. View from *IF THE SNAKE*, Okayama Art Summit, 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Karma International, Miguel Abreu Gallery and Sprüth Magers. Photography by Ola Rindal; background: John Gerrard. *X. laevis (Spacelab)*. 2017. View from *IF THE SNAKE*, Okayama Art Summit, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Simon Preston Gallery. Photography by Ola Rindal



Melissa Dubbin & Aaron S. Davidson. *Delay Lines*. 2019. View from *IF THE SNAKE*, Okayama Art Summit, 2019. Collection of Ishikawa Foundation, Okayama. Image courtesy of the artists. Photography by Ola Rindal

In an abandoned elementary schoolyard in Okayama, Japan, a forlorn dancer hummed while another responded by slowly contorting her body. Part of a performance staged by Berlin-based artist Tino Sehgal, they writhed, embraced one another and roamed around artificial sand dunes that conjured up a post-apocalyptic landscape. Eventually, they perched beside a defunct swimming pool filled with sickly bubbling pink liquid. *Skin Pool (Oromom)*, is a creation of Swiss artist Pamela Rosenkranz, who describes the work as dissolving humans into a fluid trace, and in which she used a particular colour of paint intended to imitate the colour of Caucasian flesh. Above the pool was a projection by John Gerrard, *X. laevis (Spacelab)*, which features fertility tests on frogs at zero gravity.

This eerie scene was at the heart of the Okayama Art Summit, held in the Setouchi region of Japan. This year's artistic director, French artist Pierre Huyghe, entitled the triennial *If the Snake*. The incomplete sentence was not only a provocative trigger from which artists were invited to speculate, but also suggested ways in which one work could unfurl into another, like a slithering snake. In many senses the pieces by the 18 participating artists crept through and subsumed the city's urban terrain, plunging viewers

into a strange, dystopian reality. "It's a world which you enter, but I also like the idea that it's a living entity in the sense that there is different intelligence at play," said Pierre Huyghe. "Of course, there are visual, physical and semantic [processes] but some of them are chemical, algorithmic and biological."

Several of these subtle phenomena took place around the abandoned Uchisange Elementary School, which served as the epicentre of the triennial. Beyond the dunes, a series of disturbing images flickered furiously on an LED screen in Huyghe's *Not yet titled*. What at one point looked like a deformed dog suddenly morphed into a disfigured reptile with multiple eyes. A scientific experiment of sorts, the work rendered visible a person's private thoughts – after Huyghe had shown an individual several images, (including some of his fears), and a functional MRI scanner had simultaneously monitored the individual's brain. A deep neural network then reconstructed the images Huyghe's collaborator attempted to visualize in his mind.

In its unsettling blend of human and artificial intelligence, the work pointed to an ominous future in which humans could merge with computers and relinquish their authority and individuality. Coupled with Rosenkranz's work suggesting fleshy human remains



Pamela Rosenkranz, *Healer (Waters)*. 2019. View from *IF THE SNAKE*, Okayama Art Summit, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist, Karma International, Miguel Abreu Gallery and Sprüth Magers. Photography by Ola Rindal



Foreground: Etienne Chabaud, *Calculus*. 2019. Collection of Ishikawa Foundation, Okayama. Courtesy of the artist. Photography by Ola Rindal; background: Pierre Huyghe, *NOT YET TITLED*. 2019-ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist, TARO NASU, Marian Goodman Gallery and Houser and Wirth © Kamitani Lab / Kyoto

and Sehgal's unmoored dancers, the scene magnified some of the more pressing anxieties of our era, raising questions of control, technology, biogenetics, engineered identities and the role humanity plays.

If we as humans are defined by our fragility, self-awareness, consciousness and complex belief systems, then many of the works in the summit grappled with these elements. Ian Cheng's *BOB (Bag of Beliefs)*, presented a particularly ferocious threat that hurled us into a machine-led future. His computer-generated simulation of a prickly serpent (*BOB*) wolfed down everything in sight, spouting multiple dragon-like heads and growing menacingly larger. Visitors could use an app to interact with the AI creature like a video game, but *BOB* continued to thrive and gain strength independent of human presence, like an autonomous sentient being.

While *BOB* inhabited a virtual landscape, other pieces infiltrated the actual cityscape. Take *DRIFT*, artist Elizabeth Hénaff's ominous tube-like buoys placed in the Asahi River, and which monitored water toxicity levels (she used samples from the water to investigate its microbiome). Watching families as they pedaled about in cheerful pink peach-shaped boats amid her markers heightened the impact of her work, underscoring how removed our daily reality often is from the catastrophic conditions of the environment.

The same potentially contaminated water fed into Melissa

Dubbin's and Aaron S. Davidson's *Delay Lines*, an installation positioned on the river bank. It comprised scientific-looking glass instruments and tubes housed in a large translucent box. The water, eventually warmed, is deposited in a tank in which a silicone robotic manta ray fluttered in the makeshift amniotic world. As was the case with the other works, this offered a self-sufficient system that regenerated itself, rendering humans irrelevant. An animated manta is still an empty lifeless technology, its repetitive movements only coming alive in relation to the unpredictable responses of local passers-by. It's as if the installation – embedded as it was in the fabric of the city – could only be activated when others interacted with an otherwise monotonous work.

Huyghe intended that visitors to Okayama became witnesses and not spectators, forming a connection with – and being transformed by – the works. Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui's sound installation *Glitter Beats and Wild Synths / The Wave* was perhaps the most haunting and visceral of all. Housed back in the dimly-lit school gymnasium, it was structured like a strange ghost orchestra devoid of people, in which unusual instruments (made of wind devices, chains, stones, bone and metal) appeared to play themselves. Standing inside this otherworldly microcosm, engulfed by the hypnotic waves of sound, one could not help but return to the summit's premise – to ponder upon our place in the world and the strange future snaking ahead of us.