

Viral Walking

By Jennifer Liese

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IMAGINE COMMERCIAL STREET as a time line. You arrive in the East End in the distant past and walk steadily west, traveling through millennia, centuries, and decades, into the present. At Snail Road, you find a massive banner strung across the airspace high above the street. A welcome to town, you guess, but its message is perplexing: just the initials "TB."¹ The all-caps letters stretch across the banner's width, their sharp edges and crackling white paint making a vaguely sinister impression. What kind of welcome is this?

Crossing Cook Street, another sign, again rendered in thick, white, vaguely Cyrillic-looking all-caps: "SMALL." Small? Small what? You venture closer and finally see it, a tiny, lowercase "pox" at the foot of the final "L." Ah, Smallpox.² A new play being staged in town?

Approaching Pearl Street, another sign—"CHOLERA."³ A pattern emerges: diseases, plagues, pandemics. This time you notice the background behind the letters: a wash of spray-paint plumes in psychedelic pastels-fuchsia, lemon yellow, robin's egg blue-strewn with surreal stencil-ghosts of baubles and toys: beads, a horse, a lizard. What comes to mind now? Carnival, the pavement after the parade and before the sweepers. An alternate Noah's Ark. Seeing Paul Chan's video installation *1st Light*, 2005, at the Whitney Biennial in 2006, its human shadow figures falling in a projected beam



Democracy of the land: Tree of Rife, 2020, recycled vinyl banner, mixed media, 10 x 8 feet

mind, and, further, recognized their connection to climate crisis, economic disparities, racial injustice? Critchley, the artist-activist-oracle, has been laying bare such links since he parked a sand-covered car in the MacMillan Pier parking lot in 1981, putting the nexus of tourism, fossil fuels, and environmental destruction on display. He also reminds us of our complicity. "It's We, the People, after all, who are responsible," he wrote in last year's Provincetown Arts. These pandemic banners are not only memorials. They appraise the past but compel us to imagine the future. Could the act of fearless and lasting looking, of conscientious accountability, relieve our profound precarity? There's one last work in this series: The Tree of Rife, a wall-size banner in which a tree sprouts like a mushroom cloud. Headlines in collaged newsprint recount COVID's early destruction: nursing home outbreaks, lost jobs, grim case counts. A layer of colorful foam decals in the shapes of flowers and sea life add dimension and superficial cheer. The swirl surrounding the tree is extra dense here, more evidently plastic (a beach shovel, a hanger, a water gun), resembling less the celestial soup of the other banners and more one of those massive oceangoing garbage patches. Looking closely and all over, it becomes clear: this is not a tree of life, of creation, but a tree of rife, of destruction—a concentrated picture of our present global reality, rooted in the past and in ourselves. And, no, it's not on Long Point, not on any horizon; it's here and now.

It's been a long walk. Deep breath.
The breakwater stretches ahead.

End Notes

1. TB (tuberculosis) can be traced back more than seventy thousand years. A third of the world's population are said to be carriers of the ancient *Mycobacterium*, and ten million people are newly infected each year.
2. Once known as the "speckled monster" in reference to its disfiguring rash, smallpox is thought to have emerged as early as 10,000 BCE, with references found in Chinese texts some three thousand years ago. Modern, scientific vaccination originated when a British doctor inoculated his son with a bit of the variant cowpox virus in 1801 (the Latin *vaccinus* derives from *vacca*, or "cow"). The world saw its last smallpox infection in 1977, but the virus remains stocked in two heavily guarded labs—one in Atlanta, Georgia, and the other in Siberia, where a fire broke out in 2019. A smallpox cemetery off Shank Painter Road in Provincetown dates to an outbreak in the 1800s; its granite markers are carved with numbers, not names.
3. While 1817 marked its first pandemic episode, cholera, too, emerged thousands of years ago. Today it is endemic in fifty countries. Poor sanitation, whether perpetual or set off by a natural disaster, as after Haiti's 2010 earthquake, spreads the bacteria, which can cause death within hours of contraction.
4. More than 1.4 million people died from malaria in 2019, 95 percent of them in developing countries.
5. And a Google shortcut ... we know these diseases; we've lived around, with, and through them, up close or at a distance. Worth noting, however: SARS was eradicated in 2004, a year after it started, with 8,098 cases and 774 deaths worldwide.

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of flight and simply, suddenly representing all that had been felt and lost on 9/11.

Arriving at Center Street, "Malaria" looms overhead.⁴ You remember taking chloroquine prophylaxis on a trip to a far-away coast one time long ago. You think, by virtue of alphabetic coincidence, of Melania. You picture that monster throwing paper towel rolls in Puerto Rico. You notice the array of crosses and chains and nets in this banner's background and contemplate the intersection of politics, religion, geography, climate, and privilege at play in public and individual health.

You keep walking, in your mind that is, because really you're trapped in front of a computer at home, as you've been for most of the last 365 days. You started writing about Jay Critchley's series of banners broadcasting the world's pandemics in late March 2021, coincidentally on the one-year anniversary of Massachusetts' governor declaring a COVID-19 state of emergency. You're deeply tired of sitting here at the screen, so you take a narrative shortcut: Ryder Street: "HIV." Court Street: "ZIKA." Mechanic Street: "EBOLA." Soper: "SARS/CARS."⁵ You realize the "you" you've been writing to for a while now is not your reader, but yourself, and wonder whether you would have ventured into this self-talk, this first/second person point of view, pre-isolation.

At Point Street, the breakwater in view, "COVID" appears, its letters unique: not whitewashed, but collaged, from yellowed newspaper clippings showing medical workers in masks, set against a darker ground. You have finally arrived in the present, the previously unimaginable present, the present in which more than three million people have died of COVID worldwide. You remember visiting Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, walking alongside the black granite wall, running fingers along the engraved names of the dead, and also descending into the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, its suspended steel columns representing thousands of victims of lynching. Where could we possibly render three million names? Or will it be four million, or five?

Critchley's pandemic banners, part of the larger project *Democracy of the Land: Viral Warning*, are painted on 3-by-8-foot vinyl banners that once advertised concerts, theater, political candidates, and such. He has been collecting them for years with the thought of recycling them in his work. In the first few months of COVID he rolled up his sleeves, researching pandemics and constructing the banners on a large table in a small



clearing in his backyard. The newspapers were current, the stenciled objects found around his garden, the spray paint left over from some other project.

The series will be shown this summer at AMP Gallery, with no plans as of yet to return them to their original habitat on Commercial Street. Unlikely, Critchley says, but you can't help but think, What if? What if we did keep this and past pandemics right in front of our eyes, resisted the impulse to whitewash them out of sight and out of