

LANDSCAPE STORIES: 43/2012 Ravi Agarwal

Source: <http://www.landscapistories.net/interviews/43-ravi-agarwal?lang=en> Ravi Agarwal - Artist, India

“Down and Out, labouring under globalization”

LS: *You are an artist, a writer and an environmentalist. Your work includes photography, video, installation and public art. You have also produced a successful photo book, Down and Out, labouring under globalization (OUP, 2000). Can you tell about it?*

RA: The book was an invitation by Jan Breman, a well known Dutch labour anthropologist who has been researching in India for over 40 years. It led me into the lives and livelihoods of workers and families, migrating from villages to cities in search of work. They constitute over 85% of the labour force in India and form the backbone of the economy. It was over 3 years of a fascinating personal journey into the lives of people who are unknown but yet present in every aspect of our lives. I discovered the indomitable human spirit, which survives despite horrendous work conditions in sweat shops and stone mines, overcoming the politics of its condition. It was a deeply political yet humanising experience for me.

LS: *You combine social documentary and environmental activism in your films and photography. You focus particularly on the marginalised sectors of society within New Delhi's rapidly developing landscape using images of the street, people at work and in labour. Can you tell me about series Immersion. Emergence - 24 Images, 2007?*

RA: The series, *Immersion. Emergence* was the last work done over a two year engagement with the river. The whole body of work, called *Alien Waters*, was an attempt to seek familiarity in a landscape of the fast changing city I had grown up with - the river. Unlike previous bodies of work, here the photographs ended up devoid of human forms, even as they are inscribed by people everywhere. The river in Delhi is very polluted, yet it is considered pure and holy. Hindus are given holy river water as

the first food, and are cremated on the river after they die. The river is like a metaphor of life itself. The self-performatory series of 24 photographs was shot over a few hours and represents birth and death as a cycle of time, hope and a continuity of life.

LS: *Can you tell about your “personal ecologies”?*

RA: I feel that all life starts from the experience of our selves, and the relationships we have around us. It is lived as a body of internalised experience, and leads to taking responsibility for what is happening around us, starting from the self, rather than from any other. Finally the political is inscribed in the personal and vice versa.

LS: *How do we know nature? I’ m thinking to The Sewage Pond’s Memoir, your film show during the ‘After the Crash’ group show of the Orto Botanico Museum (Project of ISWA European Project - 2011).*

RA: I think ideas of nature are very complex, and fundamental to our existence. They are constantly forming and reforming. We seem to know nature as something outside us, as a deep experience. The separation makes us know nature as an ‘other,’ a duality. But we all also know nature through our myths and memories. Post enlightenment nature has been understood as a set of scientific laws and theories, as an absolute. But as Bruno Latour says, we as social beings co- create ideas of nature. I have met nuclear scientists who pray in a temple before any major event. Sadly though today we increasingly know nature as a ‘resource’ to be exploited and plundered. The film is a reflection of all these, as a personal myth about water turning to sewage in a forest I helped protect.

LS: *Can you tell me about your last project, you also co curated it. I’ m speaking of Yamuna - Elbe. A public art*

project about the two rivers Yamuna and Elbe in Delhi and Hamburg.

RA: The Yamuna.Elbe.Public.Art.Outreach project was a year long venture, as an invitation by the City of Hamburg and the Goethe Institute. The actual site projects took place in October and November 2011 in Hamburg and Delhi. The idea was to think of two very different rivers, in two very different cities. It was an intense exercise, to think of rivers in terms of culture, progress and economies. The Yamuna wants to be like the Elbe, but the Elbe is itself in question today. It is a flawed god. In the 21st century, when we are once again thinking of sustainability as a core idea, does 'progress' answer the question of 'ecology'? What happens if we replace economy with ecology?

LS: *What is it the river for you?*

RA: *For me it is place I grew up, saw my first bird - a white tailed wagtail as a budding birdwatcher, and where I sat watching the flowing waters transport me beyond time and space. It is for me a relief, a therapy, and a reminder of my mortality.*

LS: *Can you tell about the artists of the project?*

RA: *There were two sites for the project - the rivers in Hamburg and river bank in Delhi. 2 Indian artists went to Hamburg and we put up a Yamuna show within a show there. In Delhi there were 5 Indian and 5 German artists. All the works were site specific. The artists have a long practise of working with ideas of ecology and nature in different ways - social, political, ecological and **mythological**. They evoked the river in Delhi in different ways, and created an idea of the river which went beyond the current discourse of how clean/polluted the waters were. Sheba Chhachhi for example did a multimedia installation in the water about the river as **goddess**, while Gigi Scaria constructed a huge water fountain, like an urban tower, to show the idea of cleaning polluted waters, while Nana Petzet worked with a naturalist to create a small biodiversity park in the site (The*

works are all available at www.yamuna-elbe.de). All these and more helped think of the complexity of the river as an ecology rather than only a water channel. The project was also to think of public spaces as a contestable political idea where the limits of state/public begin to appear.

LS: *Which is your opinion the most iconic image, or the best iconic images (there are two international cities) of the Yamuna Elbe project?*

RA: For me the iconic image is of the site of the river front transformed by the art works. It turned from the river as 'polluted' to the river as 'beautiful.'

LS: *I imagine how much work for realize a so massive project. What feel from the visitors?*

RA: Most people in Delhi have not seen the river! However in Delhi, there are many 'publics,' not a single one. The site was chosen to provide access to the river front, and also as a political idea of the future of the city, since this is the place where over 100,000 people had been displaced in 2004, and is not the proposed promenade for the river front. It is also where the oldest bridge is, built in 1866. In many ways reviving the river as an image was important, and from what I have been told, and read, people were surprised at such a landscape as part of their city. We had also created many outreach programs with schools, youth, musicians, academics etc. to draw people to the river. In a city of 17 million people, nothing can be ever enough, but it was a good start I feel!

LS: *Which is your relationship with the architecture and the city?*

RA: The city has been a living heritage of over 1000 years. It has been constantly built and rebuilt without a break. One can find here architecture of the 11th century and also of the 20th century. However I feel more closely connected to the landscapes and open spaces of the city, since then the architecture used them with a sense of form and purpose. Unfortunately contemporary architecture in Delhi has become

a mish mash of styles and forms. The latest are soulless pre-fabricated housing, which have no place for trees or nature and is very cold and concrete. It is a reflection of the high price of land in the city, the changing nature of its inhabitants and new forms of families and social interactions. It all seems a bit alien. Yet it is a reflection of a stratified and hierarchical traditional society encountering modernity - in fact very late!

I feel that all life starts from the experience of our selves, and the relationships we have around us. It is lived as a body of internalised experience, and leads to taking responsibility for what is happening around us, starting from the self, rather than from any other. Finally the political is inscribed in the personal *and vice versa*

Interview curated by Camilla Boemio