

Politics of a Planetary Future: An Interview with Ravi Agarwal

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Ravi Agarwal, Ecological Manifesto series, 2015. Photo courtesy of artist.

In 1887, The Illinois General Assembly reversed the Chicago River, bringing water from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi instead of the other way around. Completed in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, the process ensured that the city of Chicago could reliably access clean water, despite the immense amount of industrial activity that relied upon and the waterway for production and trade. In 1999, the same lock system that made that reversal possible was acclaimed as the “Civil Engineering Monument of the Millennium” by the American Society of Civil Engineers. Both the award and the accomplishment are surreal, like something out of a China Miéville novel, perhaps especially because of the notorious pollution the same river, and it surrounding neighborhoods suffers. This industrialized

approach to natural resources is not unique. It is in effect around the world, with different countries reflecting different stages and impacts of a philosophical approach in which the environment is recognized as an instrument for human affairs. Based out of New Delhi, artist, curator, writer and activist, [Ravi Agarwal](#) works to unearth the complexity of humanity's ecological and economic imagination, drawing connections between Europe and India, while comparing the implementation and impact of industrial methods.

Caroline Picard: *How do you shift between your work as an artist, curator, writer, and environmental activist? Do you find that you've developed a rhythm between those different modes?*

Ravi Agarwal: It is exciting and challenging at the same time. It is important for me to engage politically and socially, but then there are so many modes of expressing what I think and feel. Each form needs specific outputs, requiring a different materiality that cannot be compromised of its own quality or intensity. In some ways this has become a way of my being, and I cannot seem to do without any of them. I am not aware what is being left out or undermined by working in multiple modalities at once.

CP: *In 2011, you and Till Krause with Nina Kalenbach, curated the [Yamuna-Elbe](#) project, an Indo-German exhibition that took place on two rivers, the Yamuna and the Elbe. How did that project develop?*

RA: It was a challenge to try and link two such different landscapes not only in geographical terms, but also culturally, socially, and historically. We tried to think of common points between the two sites, but also the differences. The history of urban rivers and ecologies is coincident with histories of nation building, power, and control over rivers and suppressions of both people and other species. That same history simultaneously includes fighting diseases like cholera and malaria, through the draining of marshes, and articulates what human's fear—nature as “disorder” or as wild. According to that vision, nature has been tamed. This was true in Europe from the 18th century when marshes were drained, forests decimated, and rivers channelized. Each of those instances was viewed as a sign of progress and its (undeliverable?) promise of utopia.

On the other hand, in countries like India where urbanization is taking place in 30 years compared to 300 years in Europe, the same assumptions and techniques to control of nature are being followed—via engineering and technology. All other embedded cultural positions which speak of co-existing with nature are slowly being forgotten in the framework of a global capitalism and smart cities. However, the situation is so different here—there is a different demand for natural resources, as well as intense populations and high levels of inequity. Once again the promise of progress is espoused as thing to believe in. There is a widespread belief that one day we will clean our rivers in India and restore them just like Europe did. But that notion is flawed; European rivers can only be re-naturalized to a certain extent, since so much is already gone and cannot be re-generated. Also in India the river is no longer public space, or treated like a commons.

We realized that not only has progress not dealt with ecological questions but also it has not questioned the fundamental location of man with power over nature. Today we know nature strikes back, such as in climate change.

CP: *Do you feel like the idea of translation between sites/languages/geographies/contexts of the Yamuna-Elbe Project, was something you all were interested in?*

RA: We defined three curatorial questions which were common in Germany (Europe) and India: 1) Does progress address the question of ecology? 2) How will the land look from the river 3) Is the river public space, is it free?

Besides these unifying questions, we tried to locate the two projects in the specific discourse of public art and ecology as they existed in Hamburg and in Delhi—which were different. In Hamburg people are used to public art, as it has been there for a long time. Also the discourse on the Elbe relates to a political debate about whether or not to make the river deeper so that bigger ships could come into its river port, in

order to compete with ports like Rotterdam, as well as the extent to which the Elbe can be re-natured. In Delhi the debate is different. For the Yamuna, the question is how to clean the river? How to prevent people from turning their backs on it when it is so smelly and dirty? And foster the idea of the river as an ecological landscape not only a water channel.

Also there is hardly any experience which people have with contemporary public art. So while the overall questions were common, the form of the art, the idea of publics was different. These differences changed the form of the project in the two spaces so as to lodge it in specific contexts.

It was an attempt to see a global moment in ecology and its contestations with “progress,” while locating that moment in a locally specific trajectory of art and ecology.

CP: *What did the final exhibitions or events look like?*

RA: In Hamburg we parked a barge at Hafen City, the high end site for the new gentrified Hamburg riverfront, where artists were invited to install works. Besides, it hosted talks and workshops from several people from different disciplinary backgrounds. This was on for over a month. In Delhi, the site in Delhi in the riverfront became a site for art installations, performances, talks and music concerts, walks etc., for two weeks. The riverfront—which was typically avoided by people—became a place to see, visit, and discover.



Ravi Agarwal, Sangam Engine series, 2015. Photo courtesy of artist.

CP: *In your recent exhibition, [Else, all will be still](#), you included a series of Sangam Engine photographs —images that framed individual, corroded pieces from motorboat engines that look as though they no longer work. I feel you focus on those objects to highlight the engineered materials used to fish, as well as their obsolescence, the traces of the sea’s encounter with those objects, and the choice fishermen often make to pay extra money for motorboats in order to pull a larger catch. There is something very linguistic about the images, as though each object could almost be a poem in and of itself, with a grammatical machinery; that sense was reiterated when I read about the connection you were making between the engine parts and the Sangam poetry tradition. I wanted to see if you might talk a bit about how you connect our relationship to the environment with language, and where you see the parallels and refractions between Sangam Engines and Sangam poetry?*

RA: I am very interested in the different trajectories which were possible over time, and where for one

reason or another we, as human societies, took certain paths over others. Sangam poetry is pre-modern, said to be written between 300 BC and 200 AD, in Tamil language from South India. A significant part of it deals with landscapes and internal ideas of the self. For example the sea is not the “sea,” but denotes internal sentiments like “pining,” and “waiting.” There is a dissolution of the didactic subject–object relationship, which is a far cry from how we know nature now—as an object to be conquered and codified, rather than an unknown entity which can only be partly known and experienced, depending on what questions one asks about it. I believe that we can only know nature in terms that we pre-define—that is in an epistemological system of our own making. We produce “nature” in a Foucauldian way to gain power over it, but on the other hand as a cosmic entity, nature is elusive and confusing.

The Sangam engine works arise from these thought processes. Does Nature have to be inscribed in the history of technology and capital or can it also be projected in the lost history of early landscape poetry? The two linguistic systems lead us to very different trajectories of human “progress,” and also to very different desires of human beings which are reflected in them. What are we as a species? The first or the latter? And what can we be? In this question also lies a future of sustainability I think.

CP: *[In a conversation at the Venice Biennial](#), “Disappearance As Work In Progress- Approaches To Ecological Romanticism,” you said “Somehow there has been legitimization of anything that is institutional. If something is legitimate it becomes institutional. So we have the U.N. body, the corporate bodies, and these are legitimate states. But what do they hold, and what value do they hold, what are their imaginations, we do not enquire about that and when you try and battle them and you try and reform them, they are not often aware of what you are trying to deal with.” I’m really interested in this idea of institutional imagination, perhaps especially with respect to the subject/object division. How are hierarchical patterns—or binaries of thought—re-inscribed by institutional habit? What might alternative institutions look like?*

RA: Institutions are placeholders for values and imaginations, providing society a sense of continuity. They are repositories of culture and techniques of our times, and help shape our present and the future. In many ways they are capable of holding time which is ecological or long. As humans we live for a few decades only and our cause and effect desires only relate to short periods, while ecological impacts can take centuries to manifest. Since historically, nature has been considered a “free gift,” our institutions are very human centric, and do not hold the required values to cope with the current ecological crisis, for example. Hence in an era of climate change we are struggling with embedded values in financial, political, and scientific institutions. Because the crisis is ecological, which has been the unrepresented or underrepresented reality, our institutions need to reinvent themselves very drastically to cope with it. Amitabh Ghosh, the well known author, in his recent writings on climate change, reflects why literature has been unable to speak of such “unlikely” events. It seems we cannot deal with natural calamity which is so basic that it rocks the very basis of our epistemological constructs of society. It’s like an Alien landing on Earth.

If we recognize that nature is not only a resource, but a complex idea, where we are both subject and object at the same time, we will have to reinvent the idea of “progress” itself, and rethink realities which are equally immanent—like fragility, mortality, ephemerality, un-knowability. All these are against the idea of certainty, permanence, control, greed, fixed identities, which have become the hallmark of our existence today. Imagine a society which holds such values, and the institutions which hold it. Poetry will become the language and the poet the chronicler. I do not want to romanticize this, but only to suggest that another set of values which are not “power” based, will lead to another society and another set of institutions which hold them.

CP: *During a seminar discussion about [Governance in the Anthropocene](#) at the HKW last April (2016), the group discussed modes of protest, asking how we might answer the ecological and social devastation tied to corporate and industrial extraction through civil disobedience. If I remember correctly, you pointed out that the nature of what we are facing is quite different from any power structure faced in the 60s, and as such requires a different strategy for resistance. Taking to the streets, so to speak, would not*

have the same effectiveness it once did. I wondered if you might say more about that—why wouldn't the traditional protest model work and what might alternative modes of resistance be?

RA: Like women were (are?), nature has been an outsider. Both are categories produced to be 'operated' upon, in a schema of power. In that sense, I feel, both are generated through a 'male' or patriarchal gaze. Feminism taught us that we needed a new gender sensitive politics, a new terminology and a new reading of what was considered history. Before, even our most radical politics did not recognize its inherent and deep biases of gender. Upturning power structures needs an epistemological overhaul. Similarly challenging the idea of 'nature' as the category it has come to represent, needs a new way of thinking of the planet, of other conditions which are non-human which impact our lives and our futures. The history of the world can be re-written (is being re-written in parts in fact) as a history of nature and resource-use. Only now, we are at a point of a crisis, which needs urgent attention.

In many senses we have failed in parts to bring the equity and fairness we sought through our past revolutions. There is now an easy coincidence of democracy and capital, where a very few people control the world's wealth and we have not been able to keep large corporations in check. Democracy has also provided a safety valve to counter the idea of revolution itself, and while electoral representational politics promises equity, it has also become more and more corporatized, funded by capital with private interests. I think we are coming to realize that there can be no fair human society without the long discarded and discredited term "ethics."

However introducing ethics is not only about human societies, it has to be about the idea of the non-human as well. "Human interest" has to include the "non-human" not only for human futures, but as an idea of equity itself. We need to make "nature" political, but not only in the way it has been so far, i.e. as a politics of resource use, but in a new way—as a politics of a planetary futures.

How do we hear the voices of the under-represented and the oppressed? Are we capable of hearing the voice of something that speaks a different language? Can we hear the voice of the non-human? We are far away from that still; it will mean re-inserting a lost relationship of co-existence or co-imagination of nature—more akin to what is reflected in Sangam poetry—and a new respect for what ultimately we cannot and should not really control.

This interview was conducted on behalf of Bad at Sports and the HKW.



Written by [Caroline Picard](#)

Caroline Picard is the Founding Editor for the Green Lantern Press. Recent work has been published or is forthcoming from Paper Monument, Rattapallax, MAKE Magazine and Diner Journal. She is the 2014 Curatorial Resident at La Box in Bourges, France. Upcoming curatorial projects include "Ghost Nature" (Gallery 400, January 2014 & La Box, March 2014), and "Animal Projections" (La Box, January 2014). www.copicard.com

[Yamuna-Elbe Project](#)



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