

# The Familiar is Always a Stranger

François Daireaux  
Ravi Agarwal



12



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François Daireaux  
Ravi Agarwal

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The Familiar is Always a Stranger:  
Francis D'Amico  
New Artwork

Francis D'Amico's new artwork, 'The Familiar is Always a Stranger', is a series of black and white photographs that explore the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The images are presented in a grid-like format, with each photograph capturing a different scene or subject. The overall effect is one of quiet observation and subtle commentary on the human experience.

## The Familiar is Always a Stranger

Ravi Agarwal and François Daireaux train their lens on seemingly mundane objects and activities only to raise complex questions about labour, capital, production and ecology. Though their works obliquely reference each other's practices in this two-person show, their artistic explorations lead them on very different trajectories. While Agarwal responds to Daireaux's use of the "gesture," with ruminations on caste and nature, Daireaux's oeuvre intersects with Agarwal's long-time preoccupation with the river Yamuna and the larger ecosystem. Both men are equally invested in marginalized individuals and communities as they are in issues of migration and displacement.

### Gestures

François Daireaux's 127 minute video work *Suite* is an unhurried exploration of human gestures. Only these are not signifiers of abstract emotions or intentions but result in the production of tangible objects. Started over a decade ago in 2004, the film focuses chiefly on acts of creation by the human hand and comprises of 176 carefully chosen sequences spliced together. Daireaux brings a keen sense of observation to his film making, zeroing in on commonplace activities, elevating them in the process. Daireaux has stated elsewhere, that it is not just the handmade process that he is interested in but also the living conditions of the workers. Shot during the artist's travels in Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, China, India, Morocco, Mexico, Uzbekistan and Pakistan, new sequences of manual labour are added each year, making it a work in progress.

The film depicts a melange of activities in no particular order: the painstaking creation of tiles, the decoration of a pot, the fashioning of the soles of a shoe, polishing and packing vessels, filling sausages, playing a stringed instrument, moulding and kneading clay, shaping

a hat, embroidering a garment, fitting instrument boxes into their cases to name but a few. A diversity of materials fills the frames ranging from inorganic clay or metal to organic cobs of corn. Silky fabrics, soft and malleable to the touch, occupy one end of the spectrum while at the other end hard and unyielding substances lead to calloused palms and fingers. Very rarely are gloves used. There is thereby no intermediary between hand and material, offering an immediate and haptic experience to the producer.

In all the tightly-framed shots the focus is on the hands while the perspectives vary from the top shot to those at eye level or even the odd low angle. At times the camera remains static, at others it follows the frenetic pace of the hand as it goes about performing its duties. A number of the activities depicted by Daireaux seem almost mind-numbingly repetitive. But there can be something soothing about the repetition as well. It appears an almost meditative exercise as hands go about their movements as though by rote, summoning memories of artistic practices that call for a ritual of repetition. While some activities are straightforward, others are obscure, bordering on the mysterious. What is however apparent, is that the circumstances of production are very basic. In many instances cheap labour is the chief reason for the creation of goods by hand.

Some of the gestures in the film appear quaint, antiquated and are perhaps even on the verge of extinction. As machine learning and artificial intelligence makes advances in a digital age, how many of these manual activities are likely to survive in the future? How many could be automated even now with an injection of capital? One is also tempted to contemplate the afterlife of this film: could it perhaps in a few decades be conceived of as an encyclopaedia of man-made objects or as an archive of antiquated gestures? But isn't it equally feasible that the hand-crafted object will acquire an aura of preciousness in the future, and this film could well be considered a treasure trove or repository of lost knowledge? Were it not for the conditions of production, the use of the hand could perhaps even be viewed as an act of resistance against the march of the machines.

Ravi Agarwal's *Gesture* on the other hand comprises five photographic prints: one of them depicts the raised hand of a statue, which functions as a metonym for the politician and social

reformer Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Three other prints show top-angle shots of a hand dredging through dirt for scraps of metallic waste, while in the centre of the display a can of pop somersaults through the air. These seemingly disconnected pictures are tied to several strands in Agarwal's practice and ask to be read in conjunction with each other.

As a well-known environmentalist and founder director of the NGO "Toxics Link," Agarwal has been involved in issues of chemicals and waste for several decades. Within his artistic practice, he has been exploring the idea of nature epistemologically, interrogating the manner in which it is constructed. Regarded as the "Other," nature has been treated both as a resource for capitalist production and as a depot for waste. Agarwal has been searching instead for different ways to re-imagine the human-nature relationship, which is not premised on an exploitative politics. As he once remarked, "In a sense you can say photography led me to much deeper places of ideas and thoughts within myself and it has been not just an aesthetic engagement but a deeply intellectual engagement with myself and is the very core to what I do today as a person"<sup>1</sup>.

The search has also led him to examine how nature and caste are inextricably intertwined. In India, scavenging and waste picking has traditionally been undertaken by the Dalits. Their icon Dr. Ambedkar, also the father of the Indian constitution, campaigned against the social discrimination meted out to them. In *Gesture* the activist-artist seeks to underline how one man's waste is another's treasure, while equally highlighting how the drive to cut down consumption of plastic and metallic wastes also adversely affects the livelihood of communities that have traditionally been disenfranchised. Agarwal urges more introspection on the complex linkages that exist, stating "You are not talking about objects, you are talking about people here. I think being a little more circumspect is all I am asking for. I think we all need to be less sure about what we are doing, and a little more circumspect and exploratory on the possibility of things."<sup>2</sup>

### Margins

In the installation *The Bather*, Daireaux trains his lens on a young male body

as it emerges from the river. His bathing suit consists of an ill-fitting pair of underwear stuffed with what appears suspiciously like thermocol, meant perhaps to keep him afloat. Just in front of this large ink jet print the artist has placed a concrete tub. The contrast cannot be more stark! Only the brave or the really needy would take a dip in the Yamuna, which is regarded as more of an open drain than a river. For the people who earn their livelihood on the margins of the river, the tubs—with its promise of a leisurely dip and of running water—can only be a pipe dream.

In Daireaux's *Double Augustin* a man appears silhouetted against the sky, standing in almost knee deep water with a bridge forming a diagonal in the background. There is something uncanny about the image—while the features of the man remain obscure, his reflection clearly reveals his face and body, with its baggy and bulging orange underwear. And there is more. Strangely enough, his reflection appears floating above the water instead of within it! It is only then you realize the trick Daireaux has played on you. By inverting the photograph of a man and his perfectly matched reflection, the water ends up masquerading as sky and the sky as water. The artistic ruse works well, rendering his protagonist larger than life. In reality his subject is a waste picker of sorts, foraging through the riverbed instead of a regular garbage dump. Here again Daireaux focuses on the obscure practice, unknown to many denizens of Delhi, of people who dredge the bed of the river, looking for items of worth. While wandering along the banks of the Yamuna, Daireaux chanced upon Augustin and made his acquaintance. The latter, who describes himself as a "social worker" ekes out a living selling the detritus in the river, and uses the proceeds to even help other disadvantaged people around him. Filming him over the course of the week, the artist purchased the items that Augustin brought up, to fashion seven sculptures, which along with the video form the body of the work *Augustin, Seven Days*. The black clumps of rubber in the installation resemble river sludge, in which all manner of strange objects are embedded. Augustin was converted to Christianity at the tender age of eight and yet the objects he unearthed are those used in Hindu rituals. Many of these are offered up to the river—rivers are considered sacred in India and often named after Gods and Goddesses—in accordance with Hindu rites. For Daireaux, Augustin summons associations of Christ and the river, memorable among them perhaps one of Christ walking on the water. The artist also ties in Augustin's hybrid Hindu/Christian identity with a photograph, displayed

<sup>1</sup>Interview with the artist, 2008

<sup>2</sup>Interview with the artist, 2018

opposite the sculptures. It depicts a wall bearing black handprints with a crucified Christ and the sacred Hindu symbol Om in close proximity to each other, setting up a dialogue of religions.

Similarly, in *Memorabilia*, a set of nine photographic prints Agarwal presents the viewer with objects that rag pickers have retrieved from rubbish heaps. However, unlike the items embedded in Daireaux's ungainly rubber sculptures, the items here—among them keys, a metal coil, a bangle and other tawdry trinkets—appear almost aestheticized, enshrined as they are on pieces of paper.

Besides his engagement with the micro-economies on the banks of the river, Agarwal has long been preoccupied with the conditions of the labouring body. This could be viewed in his early documentary photographs of unorganized migrant labour in Gujarat or workers in the Bhatti mines in Delhi. In this exhibition Agarwal presents us with two waste pickers: one enshrined in the centre of a photograph in *Landfill Worker-Trace City Series (ongoing)* and the other, *Boy in Blue Striped Shirt*, caught in the spontaneous act of releasing what appears like shredded paper. In the former shot, the protagonist, seated on a plastic box, a wall of waste forming his backdrop, stares at the camera, his brows knitted in a frown. This seems almost like a studio portraiture, were it not for the surroundings. The latter work consists of 20 photographs shot rapidly by Agarwal to capture the moment of sheer joy that he espied. Talking about the joie de vivre that pervades the frames, the artist mentions, "I am interested in the location of the human as the subject or the object of history, politics and social power. The human somehow gets constructed in that...but within that there is something emancipatory about being human."

It is this gesture of emancipation that attracted Agarwal in the first instance, making him reach for his camera. It is also the act that he is more interested in, as evidenced in the serial arrangement of the photographs and the pixilation of the boy's face. Unlike the landfill worker portrait, the work does not in essence revolve around a particular boy but the human ability to snatch moments of pleasure in what are otherwise dangerous and degrading working conditions. Ruminating on the work Agarwal is forthright, "Everything is wrong here. There is a boy. He should not be working, he is a waste picker. He is in a toxic environment. Yet you see this assertion, which is emancipatory and you wish you had that assertion.

To me it says a lot about that person's possibility and resolve<sup>3</sup>." It is this desire to capture what makes us human, beyond solely the structural readings of a person, that drives Agarwal.

### Men and Machines

In the 14 minute-long film *Lb/in2*, Ravi Agarwal presents us with a picture of decrepitude: a once flourishing coal-based power plant, now on the brink of disassembly. Built in the 1950s shortly after Indian independence from colonial rule, it counted as one of Jawaharlal Nehru's "temples of modern India." As India's first prime minister, Nehru wanted to build a nation state which would leapfrog into modernity and drew up plans to create dams, steel plants and research institutes. Set up with US collaboration, the Indraprastha power plant had all the markers of what then constituted cutting edge technology.

Flash forward 60 years and the same plant is an epitome of obsolescence and environmental pollution. For Agarwal, it also mirrored his own journey of nearly six decades and he was drawn to the idea of the plant as a witness to the changing metropolis. Despite its evident disuse and decay, Agarwal manages to inject an otherworldly air into his frames. Shooting with the available ambient light, he brings out the cold glints of blue and green light as they play on the machines, lending them an almost patina-like feel. Though all around vestiges of human activity abound, there are no humans to be spotted. The human element is provided instead by the multiple audio tracks that are laid on the footage—Nehru's famous "Tryst with Destiny" speech delivered on the midnight of Indian independence in 1947 and the slogans of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement to stop the building of large dams on the Narmada river, which would lead to the displacement of thousands of villagers. There are also sounds of a babbling brook and machines working—spliced in by Agarwal from another running plant—which seem at odds with the static machines.

Set up almost as a juxtaposition to Agarwal's disused electricity-generating plant, François Daireaux transports us to the glass manufacturing city of Firozabad in Uttar Pradesh. No stranger to the town, he has been visiting and photographing its workers and has also fashioned sculptures from the

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<sup>3</sup>Interview with the artist, 2018

glass bangles produced there. Most of the glass manufactured in the town is exported abroad and Daireaux is interested in these globalizing flows of goods and capital, using it to further explore issues of the global and the local. Unlike the mammoth plant and its machinery depicted by Agarwal, glass is manufactured in small and medium enterprises and under conditions that leave much to be desired. Despite the challenges, the units continue to function, churning out glass items of domestic and commercial use.

In the 63 minute-long film, *Bhagwati*, Daireaux visits a glass tube manufacturing company, Bhagwati Glass Enterprises in Firozabad. Most of the action is set in the office of its proprietor Devki, who after three decades in the trade doesn't visit his production units personally, relying instead on a network of six surveillance cameras to let him know what is happening on the ground. The act of surveillance also produces a space of alienation, a divide between the worker and the owner.

Daireaux focuses his lens on the control screen in the office for several days on end, which offers mainly top angle shots of people entering the office and poor-quality footage of glass being manufactured or stockpiled. This mechanism of filming creates a doubling of the gaze with the subjects twice removed—they are filmed directly by the CCTV and then indirectly by the artist's camera.

Interspersed with grainy footage are also well-framed shots of workers taken by the artist within the factory premises. People shovelling walls of glass bottles—not unlike the backdrop in Agarwal's landfill photograph—sleeping workers including one who uses a brick as a pillow, women picking up shards of glass waste and a register, where the attendance of workers is marked by hand. The artist also offers us abstract compositions: the strange geometry presented by masses of glass tubes or a snaking red line of molten glass.

The soundtrack in *Bhagwati* has nothing to do with lofty ideals around the nation state or sounds of protestors. Instead, the conversation in the office proffers telling insights into the current socio-economic and political landscape. There is of course the question of money or the lack of it as the film was evidently shot before and during the demonetisation drive in

India in November 2016. The topics of conversation are varied: negotiations with workers and buyers and the health of relatives and the business.

An aspect that probably needs consideration is the role of speech in *Bhagwati*. Who has the power to speak? Most of the conversation takes place in the office with the owner, office workers and buyers. They dictate the rules of the game, they appear to be the only ones that matter and have authority. The workers are depicted going about their work silently, without much agency, almost like pawns on a chessboard. Since Daireaux did not understand Hindi, the language used in the film, the protagonists discuss matters freely. They even comment on him, using it as a peg to discuss foreigners and their habits in general. Daireaux is an almost invisible or ghostly presence—a silent observer, a proverbial fly on the wall.

These sub-texts within the film also offer us insights into deep-rooted prejudices around race, religion and class as they do about the perceived economic threat from countries such as China. Will the glass-making units of Firozabad be able to sustain their antiquated processes one wonders and if yes, for how long?

“The Familiar is always a Stranger” sets up an engaging dialogue between the artistic practices of Ravi Agarwal and François Daireaux. As they respond to shared affinities on issues of manual labour, ecology and marginalized communities, they prod the viewer to question the human-nature relationship, the place of the hand-crafted object in an increasingly digital world, and more importantly, ponder on what it means to be human.

## François Daireaux

“To decide to leave one’s home, to see how things happen elsewhere: this is the choice François Daireaux makes, in order to measure the pulse of the world, its heartbeats, pressures and pulsations, its cadences, arrhythmias, pauses, silences and cacophonies. For almost twenty-five years, he has solitarily sought less visible sites where people live and work, to visit them recurringly year after year, forming enduring relationships, collecting their sounds and images and preserving them on the recording materials he brings along with him. In the process he composes the vocabulary of his oeuvre, as an extended space of sculpture. Working as a gleaner, a forager, and harvesting forms, situations and images through an exercise of observation, he hollows and carves out layers of the real. Obsessed by gestures and their transformational potential in physical as well as social space, in the last few years, his sculptural photographic and film work has intensified, affirming a visual oeuvre which makes apparent its contours and time investments, and questioning the alienation of bodies in the entropy of progress everywhere.”

‘Devki’ is the owner of “Bhagwati Glass Enterprises”, a glass tube factory in Firozabad that he created in the year 1973. After devoting himself to the business for more than three decades, he now doesn’t visit any of the production units himself. He stays confined to his office and controls work through a screen with images sent from six surveillance cameras placed in different sections of the factory. These blurred and vacillating images are his only contact with the activity of his workers, who produce phenomenal quantities of glass tubes, day and night.

François Daireaux, spent days in Devki’s office for days filming these images displayed on the control screen along with recording some off-screen conversations. Devki’s office constantly had visitors who were friends, business associates, workers and acquaintances. The artist as an observer sat there filming these intimate, political and/or economic dialogues which turned the place into a veritable microcosm with a global context sometimes. Behind closed doors, stories unfolded, intersected, and often tales were embroidered, while in the production spaces the workers rested, waited, breathed, and played, in close proximity to the incandescent glass stream that passed by.



François Daireaux  
Bhagwati  
(Work in progress)  
Color video with sound  
Duration - 74 mins  
2017





François Daireaux  
Suite  
(Work in progress)  
Color video with sound  
Duration- 127 mins  
2004-2017



'Suite' as the title suggests is a vast corpus of video work started by François Daireaux in the year 2004 and remains an ongoing one. The artist has captured and composed 176 sequences depicting gestures/ actions of manual workers till date. These are endangered gestures that François Daireaux has constantly filmed and gleaned during his stay in Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, China, India, Morocco, Mexico, Uzbekistan and Pakistan. With every passing year, the video is reworked and readjusted as new gestures that have been recorded are added and further readapted according to the context of an exhibition. It is the artist's preoccupation to keep recording gestures in a global context, making it a work continuously in progress.

François Daireaux  
The Bather  
Inkjet print – 86.6 x 128.3 inches  
Concrete bath tub – 23 x 60 x 31.5 inches  
2017

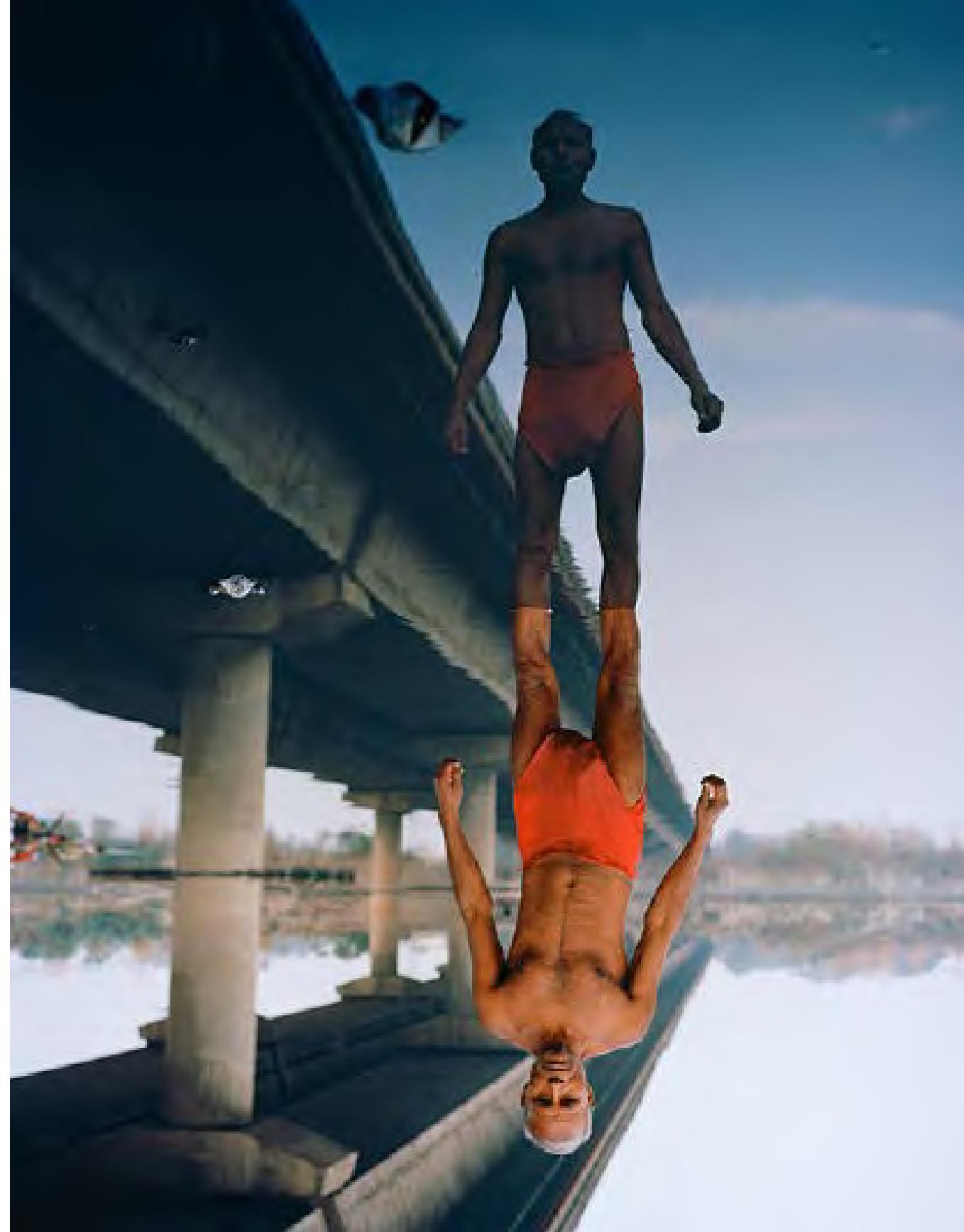


“I met Augustin during my wanderings on the banks of the river Yamuna in Delhi. Everyday, for over many decades, Augustin has undertaken to rummage the riverbed, not only to clean it but also to find objects that he can sell. Augustin likes to say : “I am a social worker !”

With the money recovered from the sale of these objects, he provides for his own needs but also helps the poorest people around him. We have met several times in recent years and I wanted to pay tribute to him by making a set of pieces, the fruits of our collaboration.

I suggested filming him during a week, as he searched for objects at the bottom of the river and to sell me these objects, which I then used to make it a set of seven sculptures.

François Daireaux  
Double Augustin- Delhi.  
Inkjet print  
73 x 59 mins  
2017





François Daireaux  
Augustin, Seven Days.  
Set of 7 sculptures  
Black rubber, objects from the Yamuna River  
2017





François Daireaux  
The Bridge, Yamuna River- Delhi  
Inkjet print  
59 x 88.5 inches  
2017

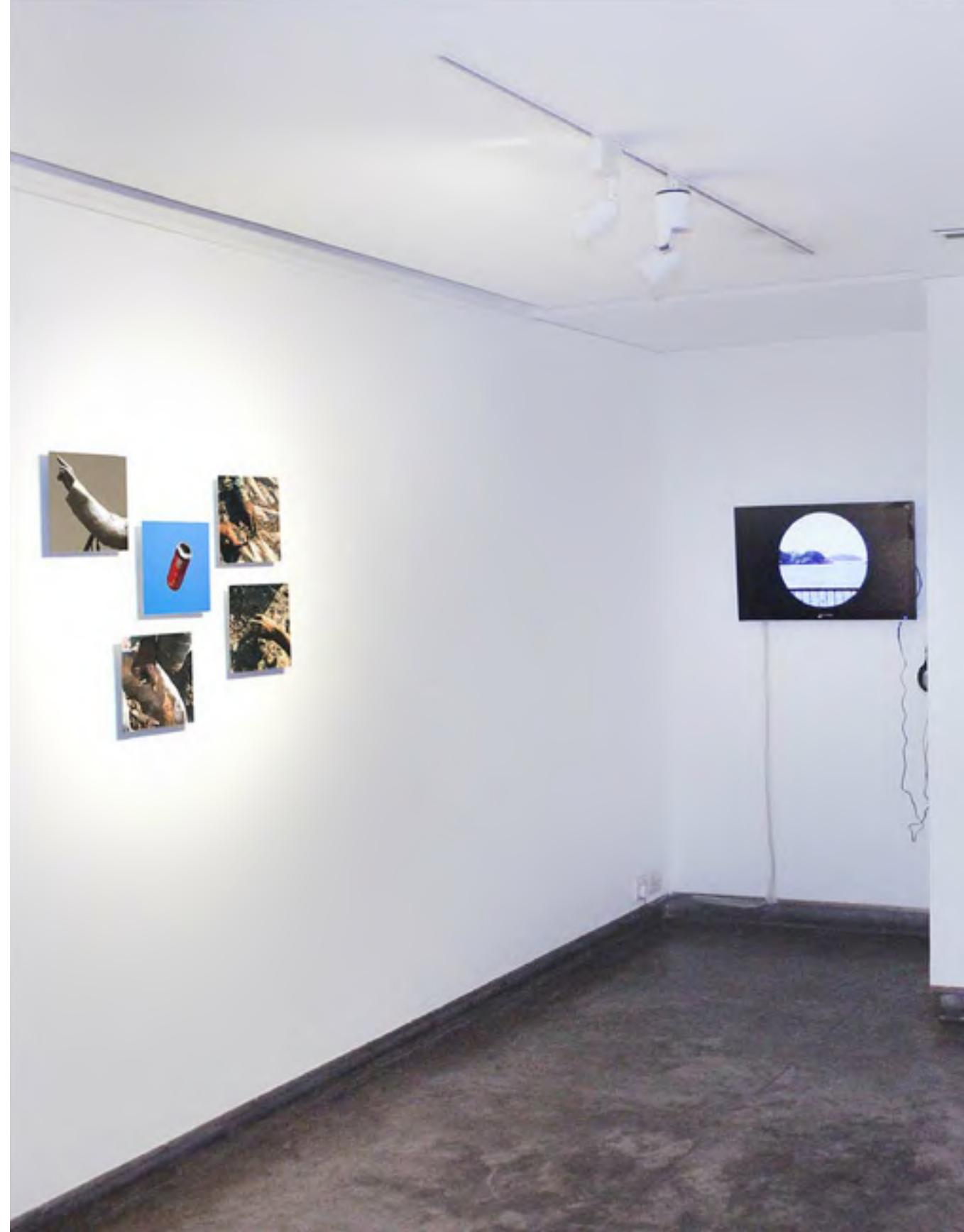
## Ravi Agarwal

“In the aura of everything marginal, lie signs of our futures.”

The constructed category of ‘nature,’ and the deep caste, gender and class hierarchies of human societies reveal a play of power. Within their recessed engagements are forms of bare lives, existing on their own terms, which challenge dominant notions of understandings. Those unfettered and sometimes fleeting moments of seeing, reveal both extinctions but also sensuality, which have engaged Ravi Agarwal for long. Over the years, working in the complexly inhabited landscapes of small-scale fishermen, waste-pickers, migrant laborers, industrial and street workers, small farmers etc., he has examined the myriad of relationships amongst both the human as well non-human, to rethink these categories culturally as well as politically. The search has also led him to examine their depictions in literature and poetry, including ancient Tamil Sangam poetry, to re-discover lost ways of the human – nature category. Through his long-standing practice which intertwines seamlessly between being an artist, curator and environmentalist, Agarwal engages at multiple levels of the discourse. He seeks to re-locate these increasingly invisible terrains of marginality, to question contemporary global understandings of an anthropogenic planetary future and ideas of progress.







Ravi Agarwal  
Gesture  
5 Photographic Prints  
(variable installation)  
10 x 9.5 inches (each)  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017



Ravi Agarwal  
Lb/in 2  
HD Video with Audio, 14 mins  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017









Ravi Agarwal  
Boy in Blue Striped Shirt  
Series of 20 Photographic Prints  
(variable installation)  
16 x 12 inches each  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017



Ravi Agarwal  
Memorabilia  
Series of 9 photographic prints  
(variable installation)  
12 x 10 inches (each)  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017





Ravi Agarwal  
Trace City Series (ongoing)  
Landfill Worker  
Photographic print  
48 x 40 inches  
2017



Ravi Agarwal  
Trace City Series (ongoing)  
Landfill III  
Photographic print  
48 x 40 inches  
2017



Ravi Agarwal  
Trace City Series (ongoing)  
Landfill I  
Photographic print  
20 x 24 inches  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017



Ravi Agarwal  
Trace City Series (ongoing)  
Landfill I  
Photographic print  
20 x 24 inches  
Ed. 1 of 5  
2017

### About François Daireaux

Far from tourist maps or any form of exoticism, for almost twenty-five years now Daireaux has embarked alone, travelling to countries he's never visited before, to record his experiences there. In the process he composes the vocabulary of his oeuvre, which can be considered as an extended space of sculpture—notably through his manner of composing his photographic images and films. He works as a gleaner, or forager, harvesting forms, situations and images in a pugnacious and solitary exercise of observation. He hollows out and sculpts the layers of the real, obsessed by gesture and the transformations it creates, in physical matter as well as in social space. In the last few years, the artist's photographic and film work has intensified, affirming a visual oeuvre in which we appreciate the contours and the investment, both in its questioning of the alienation of bodies and in its sensitized approach to the urban entropy of emerging nations.

### About Ravi Agarwal

Delhi-based Agarwal's work bridges the divide between art and activism, drawing on the semiotics of the documentary to politicize the aesthetics of contemporary India. Using photography, video, text and installations, he intervenes in the continued colonization of nature to pose questions about ecology and society, urbanity, preservation and toxicity. His work has been shown widely, including at Documenta XI (2002), the Kochi Muziris Biennale (2016), the Sharjah Biennale (2013), and Indian Highway (2009) etc. In 2011, he co-curated the "Yamuna-Elbe" an Indo-German twin city public art and ecology project in Delhi and Hamburg. He is the co-curator for the Indo-German public art event "Embrace our rivers" to be held in Chennai, India (September 2017) by the Goethe Institute. Ravi is also the founder of the Indian environmental NGO Toxics Link.



