

STORIES FROM THE THEATRE OF AURA AND DECAY

Activism requires sure action, certainty about a future, says Ravi Agarwal

Ravi Agarwal's social conscience has been a constant in his rich body of multidisciplinary artworks. Adept at grounding the macro-level big human questions of our times in the micro-practices of lived experience of his interlocutors,

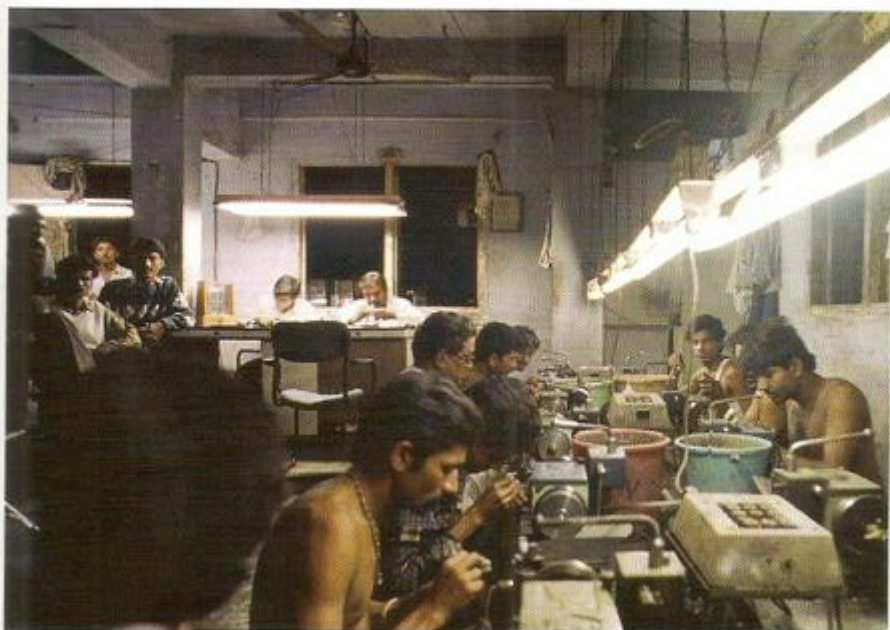
Ravi Agarwal
Down and Out Series
Digital Archival Prints from
Transparencies
30 X 20 Inches, 1996-2000

and acutely sensitive to questions of power and representation, Agarwal's work frequently engages marginalized populations, such as the laborers in his acclaimed series 'Down and Out.' Balancing his commitment to activism and social justice with his preoccupations with questions about 'nature, work, labor and the street,' Agarwal offers ethnographically sensitive works that explore the human condition through the quotidian stories of everyday people's lives.

Maya Kóvskaya: Since part of the power and beauty of your work is the place of human lives and their stories in your oeuvre, so I'd like to spend a lot of this interview grounding your larger preoccupations in your recent solo exhibition at The Guild in Mumbai, 'Of Value and Labour.' How did you become who you are, and what shaped you as an artist and public intellectual?

Ravi Agarwal: I grew up in times where knowledge was considered the future, modernity. These times shaped ideas, thoughts and values. There was idealism, art and literature. Photography became a preoccupation early on, at age 12 or 13. Professionally though, I felt compelled to lead a more 'useful' life, and I never wanted to be a commercial or journalistic photographer. Twenty years later activism became my way to 'act,' and artistic expression was almost everything else I cared for.

MK: How have you managed to balance the requirements of your artwork with your political agenda and maintain such a light touch in the work?



RA: Activism requires sure action, a certainty about a future, while art is about being vulnerable, listening, looking, feeling, exploring. We can never know, only explore. There is always another context, many uncertainties. My artistic forms are not an attempt, they merely emerge, maybe they are a reflection of an uncertainty.

MK: Describe a watershed experience that transformed you and made you see the world differently.

RA: 'Down and Out' was a transformative experience. Through entering a world of human deprivation and powerlessness, I was invited into a world of human dignity and intensity. It questioned my assumptions about people, about poverty and forced me to think of my own locations, confront issues of representation and the idea of politics.

MK: Who is your art for? Does this vary from project to project? Is there a difference between the Public Art

projects and works shown in a gallery?

RA: Art is firstly personal, a discovery and a way of making tangible the inexpressible to oneself. The challenge is to find the core of what something is about. Public art has to have a modified language, even if the core idea is the same. I feel public art has to have a 'purpose' beyond the art itself.

MK: What are the greatest challenge facing contemporary art today? Is there a way to co-opt the commoditization cycle and make consumption into something that can transform minds and practices?

RA: Challenges include determining what counts as 'the contemporary?' 'What constitutes the domain of the 'now' and its relationship to the past? Are there always many co-existing trajectories? What should one include (or exclude), in this 'post post' world, as art or art practice? When everything is commodified, the idea of the 'radical' or the 'transformative' becomes uncertain. There seems to be no anchor outside of capitalism. We may not know how/where to escape anymore.

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MK: If part of the problem with our current socio-economic order is the way in which human beings, particularly people subsisting low in the economic hierarchy, are systematically de-humanized, can art play a role in re-presenting that 'stolen' humanity back to people, reminding them of their own worth?

RA: Good and powerful journalism is probably better in reminding the world of its 'stolen' humanity. However art has the possibility of touching another sphere of human life. It is like a wedge, an interstice. 'Down and Out' was meant to be a document of working people's lives. It reflected a human condition situated within our economic and

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Gallery View: The Guild





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political systems. The labourers in the series probably never saw the pictures we showed in Gujarat. The book was never proposed as 'art,' or a coffee table fetish object. The price was subsidized to encourage circulation. Personally, the project became an encounter with the human spirit, its resilience, dignity and celebration. It was a world, which could not afford any pretensions, where life was immediate, here and now. I always saw something else besides the poverty and politics, even though those were undeniably omnipresent.

MK: Part of the de-humanization process that subjugates laboring people is a discursive

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transformation of subjects into objects. Can art help to reverse this process?

RA: Unknowingly we internalize the dynamics of 'power' and create ideas of human beings as 'those people.' I remember seeing a lone man breaking stones in a quarry in the scorching mid-summer heat. It seemed so futile, one stone, one

man, a huge sprawling quarry. Yet when I approached him, he stopped, looked me in the eye, lit a 'beedi' and gave me a half knowing smile! It was an amazing moment -

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The Transaction
Archival Digital Print
54 X 42 Inches, 2011



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a faceless speck had become a self-assured person. Art can make us more aware and human, conscious of our follies.

MK: Marx talked about how 'false consciousness' holds together exploitative arrangements. Unequal and exploitative social and economic orders are often held in place in part by what is called 'the internalization of oppressor consciousness,' in which 'the oppressed' identify with their oppressors and adopt their values. Have you witnessed this process at work? Does it make sense to talk of 'oppressor consciousness' if the real oppressor is not simply a group of people bent on exploitation, but rather an ideological orientation and structure of values that treats the world as material to be exploited?

RA: Poverty is multidimensional, historical and caused by social structures that 'normalize' this to maintain a status quo. The oppression I saw was deep, eons old, played out through caste and class, and disempowering. There was no protest of the mafia like condition in the diamond cutting operations or the harshness of the brick kilns, or of child labor, even though such work is illegal. Those

who paid the wages were called 'mai baaps' (my masters). I once saw a rare public protest by diamond workers, quelled by police. The exploitation chain was both vertical and horizontal. The local trade union took money from both the worker and the owner.

MK: Some argue that in our contemporary order of things, existence and worth have been reduced to possession: 'to have is to be, and to have-not is to be worthless,' as it were.

RA: Values such as 'worth/worthless' are imposed onto lives, putting them into a framework of hierarchies and power. The sugarcane cutters went back to their camp each evening after 12 hours of back breaking work for paltry wages. They cooked, sat around a bonfire and sang. They had nothing, yet they seemed to have it all. It was very humbling.

MK: Some have argued that we live in times that alienate us from our sense of agency, leaving us feeling

powerless and helpless in the face of large 'forces' that seem to control our lives. Was there a sense of agency among the people you worked with, in spite of their difficult conditions? Can we enlarge people's sense of their own agency and powers, or are attempts at such interventions inevitably paternalistic and doomed to reinscribe patterns of dependence and passivity?

RA: Agency needs conditions where it becomes possible to realize it, though empowerment, education and rights. I met a tea stall owner, who had set up his shop outside the factory where he had been fired unjustly, and betrayed by his union. He told me that he was waiting for the day he could take revenge on the factory owner, but such instances were rare.

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