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## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### AESTHETICS OF ECO ART

Sreejata Roy maps the process of the works created by Ravi Aggrawal and Atul Bhalla at the Water Residency at the Khoj, New Delhi.



"The moment when art and environment made each other more acquainted..."

This line comes to mind when I bump into the side of the river Yamuna at Jagatpur, to report on the residency initiated by Khoj under the category of 'Eco Art'.

I had a wonderful opportunity to spend a couple of days on the Yamuna banks, interacting with Ravi Agarwal, an environmentalist and photographer, and artist Atul Bhalla. Their collaborative exhibition, a product of the residency, is a conscious creative attempt to explore the aesthetics underpinning the tarnished and wrecked world in the neighbourhood of the river.

While the genre of Eco Art is necessarily driven by environmental as well as socio-cultural and political facts, it also challenges the contemporary values of art and the role of the artist. The space of Khoj became a platform for two experts to create an interdisciplinary awareness regarding the degradation of ecosystems, and the aesthetics of changing urban landscapes.

Both Ravi Agarwal and Atul Bhalla have engaged intensively with the river for the past few years; both have a similar ecological feel for it, and claim a similar ethos as practitioners. But they have different ways of artistically deploying their sensibilities.

The artists arranged a picnic at Jagatpur to get people to link to the river. Ravi focussed on the terrain north of Wazirabad, where the riverbed has been converted into vast swathes of marigold fields, on which many people depend for their livelihood. He explores the river through the labour practices that it supports. Atul organised a 22-kilometre walk along the banks, and described his personal connection with the river, as a citizen.

Agarwal has been interested in photography since very young age, and this passion has continued in tandem with his interest in environmental activism. He founded 'Toxics Link' (<http://www.toxicslink.org>), a leading non-profit environmental organisation, where he combines both these areas. In October 2006 he had a solo exhibition in Delhi, Alien Waters, on the theme of the river. This show was the culmination of two years' work.

Agarwal said that the Khoj residency gave him the opportunity to revisit the Yamuna and create a new relationship with it, themed around the fertility of the river. A main symbol of this energy was the marigold fields and the lives connected to them. "I trace them back to how they are used in the city, and then discarded as waste." The other main symbol used in his artwork was that of the sink, representing the river water that we take for granted, as well as the sewage that we associate with the Yamuna. "The sink depicts the city's relationship with the river; the flowers depict the river's relationship with the city... This is a constant exchange."

Agarwal clarified that he has always used photography in a documentary form, but for the Khoj residency he tried a different approach, involving digital media as well as prints, and other media forms, including installation. This kind of experimentation was new for him. He created postcards from his prints and sent these to friends, asking them to post their responses on his blog (<http://haveyouseenthe river.blogspot.com>).

Atul Bhalla is formally trained in visual art. His earlier work in relation to the river is on sand and castings, as well as self-performance. He focuses on making physical objects using various materials, a very personalised form of expression.





"I had been visiting this site on the Yamuna bank for over two years, and slowly realised that Delhi has no relationship with the river," he explained. "My key concern was this disturbing level of complete disengagement."

Bhalla planned the walk along the Yamuna from Palla Village, the northernmost stretch of the river next to the Haryana border, to Jagatpur. This took six-and-a-half hours. The next day, the walk from Jagatpur to Majnu-ka-Tila had to be abandoned due to swampy marshland that made crossing impossible on foot. A boat had to be hired for the rest of the journey, just past the Wazirabad barrage. Sewage pipes and drains emptying into the river constantly denied access, so one had to repeatedly go up the road and back down to the bank, thus insistently fracturing the sense of mobility and connection to the terrain. There was no pathway from Manju-ka-Tila to ITO, so again it was necessary to hire a boat. At ITO, a security barrage prevented further movement. The following day was extremely foggy, and the walk had to be abandoned. The next day the walk was re-initiated, and from ITO it proceeded to Okhla.

Bhalla has an installation of sinks scattered on the riverbank, as a comment that the citizen is concerned with the river only as a waste bin for urban garbage. His displays combine videos, installations and photographs; to extricate and analyse one form out of the composite would be a challenging task, as they are so deeply embedded in each other.

Those who have a preference for 'realist' art might not consider Eco Art to be 'authentic' mode of expression, or even a valid category. However, for the past hundred years artists have been interrogating the Western tradition of realism, and its valorisation of painting and sculpture as the only worthwhile media. Contemporary art practice, enabled by technological developments, is relentlessly experimental; this holds as true for environmental art, which developed in the 1960s in response to the environmental movement, as for any other genre. Work such as Agarwal's and Bhalla's, created individually and in collaboration, points to the urgent need for new kinds of interpretation, commentary and signification in the context of critical issues in both art and environmental practices.

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