

The Work of Freedom in a World of Images

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THE PHOTO SERIES EXHIBITED BY ARTIST RAVI AGARWAL IN DOCUMENTA11 FIRST appeared in a book titled *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, co-authored by sociologist Jan Breman and academic and journalist Arvind Das. The book, which is based on fieldwork done by Breman from the early 1960s in pockets of Gujarat, is a portrait of movement. The term "labour", Breman notes, has been used mostly to signify industrial work; however the "largest working class in world history was mainly or solely employed in agriculture".¹ The question of caste-based exclusion of certain communities from economic mobility, coupled with the near absence of radical land reforms, has laid the foundation for this state of ceaseless movement. Breman takes the case of the Dublas (which in English translates as "weak"), a scheduled tribe who were later rechristened by Gandhi as Halapati² or "the bearers of the plough". On account of lack of skill and basic education they were not eligible to work in the modern factories of Mumbai, and after the abolition of bonded labour big landowners no longer wanted them to work the land. Like the Dublas, a massive contingent of "unemployable" rural peasantry had no other option but to shift location in order to find work and a dwelling. This gave a seasonal form and rhythm to the workers' lives. It is this ceaseless, sometimes weary but mostly resilient, rhythm that Agarwal's images conjure up. These are photographs not just of workers but also of work. People in *Down and Out* and in Agarwal's images have things to do, even in the absence of a job description. The dynamism of the moment in which these pictures are taken offers a glimpse of the larger momentum into which these lives are precariously woven.

A building is being made, sacks of vegetables are being lifted and loaded onto a railway platform (figure 1). The next train must be around the corner, the handcart full of



perishables must reach the mandi before it is too late. Cloth, metal, water all begin to bear the imprint of the work day. Cityscapes gleam in the background, standing as provocation between two ways of life. They oscillate, from being sacred symbols of contemporary capital to providing the incidental landscape amidst which the drama of a working life at large unfolds. Martha Rosler, discussing the work of American photographers like Chauncey Hare and Fred Lonidier, notes: "Their chosen course is a difficult one. They do not mark their closure in discourse per se. It is a practice that resides in 'the world at large' and it resides in museums, galleries, lecture halls and symposia. They swim in the stream of art-world discourse to varying extents but are more interested in having an effect on the world that has nothing to do with it."³

Rosler locates these kinds of documentary photography practices within the domain of "a culture of opposition". While her commentary is about the portraits of Standard Oil workers made by Chauncey and those of the photo industry made by Lonidier, it seems to speak to Agarwal's practice. At once environmentalist, image-maker and writer, Agarwal brings an acute awareness of various conceptual roadmaps offered by images. Describing Project Y (Public. Art. Outreach), an art project held on the banks of the river Yamuna in 2011, he outlines a new empathetic-critical vision of landscape and the need to reproduce the river as an ecological public.

Building on Agarwal's suggestion of recovering "affective ways of knowing and relating with nature outside a forensic architecture of knowledge",⁴ T.J. Demos writes: "Creative ecology would suggest nothing less than a radically different mode of world-building, a cosmopolitics based within the values of equality and justice, rather than hierarchy and exploitation, individual wealth accumulation and competitiveness."⁵ Demos argues that art

¹ Photograph from *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, Ravi Agarwal, 2000.



2
Photograph from *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, Ravi Agarwal, 2000.

3
From the series *Metal Man*, Ravi Agarwal, 2008.

has the ability to create the connections that make the world open up as a network of relationships and forms of life.

Demos's key terms for a radical contemporary ecological discourse also seem like the weave with which some of Agarwal's works are interworked. A puzzling image appears in his documenta11 project. In the thick of night, bare-chested workers peer over machines under the harsh low-hanging tubelights of a factory; other workers wearing sweaters look directly into the camera (figure 2). It is difficult to get clear information from this picture. Even simple details elude us—what is being made, what time it is, even what the season is. Nothing is clear except the feeling of toil and the foreshortened horizon of body and mind. This artistic disarticulation is mirrored in Agarwal's later works like *Alien Waters* (2004–06) where a scarecrow, an abandoned setup of two plastic chairs on the banks of a filthy river, rituals of death imaged as ashes and flowers floating on water, defaced idols become unlikely narrators of the story of the battered Yamuna. *Metal Man* (2008) is a series of performative photographs, where an unclothed male body engages the metallic components of an industrial machine with a simultaneously combative and erotic charge (figure 3). Agarwal frames objects as they are held close to a body from which the face is excluded, captured in portrait-like midshot. The sweaty body is covered all over with the dust and grease from machine parts. The fingerprints of this worker are smeared all over these metallic surfaces. The contortions of his shoulders, arms and chest seem not discrete but a continuation of the ridges, joints and hollows of this machine. What is the collateral for this fusion? What are the terms of the contest? And what are the longings of this intimacy between the worker and his work? These frames hang like questions.

What makes Agarwal's aesthetic and critical manoeuvres pressingly contemporary is that his various forays into photography, environmental activism, installation and video appear so strongly integral to each other. In a reflective piece about his own practice he notes: "While photographing migrant labour in the interiors of South Gujarat, my time was spent with those who toiled at the grassroots of the economy, labouring ceaselessly, unheard, unseen. 'How have the lives of these citizens of modern India changed over the past half century?' I asked myself. My training as an engineer, obviously, had not provided me with an answer, or more importantly, confronted me with the question enough."⁶ The separation

of the technological from the social, human and ecological is a theme he repeatedly returns to. In visualizing how technological developments seem to have both surpassed and yet deeply transformed working-class lives Agarwal draws attention to the central problematic of our time.

Echoing some of these concerns and placing them in conversation with globalizing transformation, the artistic director of documenta11 Okwui Enwezor proposes: "From the moment the postcolonial enters into the space/time of global calculations and the effects they impose on modern subjectivity, we are confronted not only with the asymmetry and limitations of globalism's materialist assumptions but also with the terrible nearness of distant places that global logic sought to abolish and bring into one domain of deterritorialized rule."⁷

This "asymmetry" and "terrible nearness of distant places" which Enwezor identifies as markers of the postcolonial mediation of the time of global capital provide an interesting context to situate the work of Agarwal. Placed in the company of photographers such as David Goldblatt and his images of economic disparity in post-apartheid South Africa, Olumuyiwa Osifuye who captures different facets of Nigerian urbanity on the streets of Lagos, Alan Sekula who documents both life at sea and life of the sea, Bernd and Hilla Becher who photographed gargantuan, empty industrial buildings in Europe, Agarwal's work emerges as an interlocutor for not only the local-urban, but also for a global imaginary of justice that is consciously seeking to reconfigure the skewed distribution of power.

Agarwal's images deal with complex social locations with a sense of poetic urgency, unbound by ideological imperative. They revel in their imageness, in the fluid shadow of the unphotographable. It is perhaps useful to continue thinking about his artistic-political project not just through his visuals, but also the suggestion of that which needs to be imagined. In his work *Ambient Seas* Agarwal gives us a haunting thought: "On land I was certain, I could summon my social network and feel secure. I could call upon my legal and personal status and my ownership ledger and feel immortal. On land I could forget for a moment that I was just another being, a life, a life form. Here I have left my sociopolitical history and identity behind. The sea and my relationship to it has come down to the basics. I have slipped from being an individual into my 'species' identity."⁸

Agarwal's images of the global condition remind us of our inability to know fully and yet pose the challenging question of whether we can still be capable of radical empathy, whether our dislocation can ever be a roadmap towards a voyage and—most simply—whether we can still be free.

NOTES

- 1 Jan Breman, Arvind N. Das and Ravi Agarwal, *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism* (Amsterdam: University Press, 2000), pp. 4–6.
- 2 Jan Breman, *Labour Bondage in West India: From Past to Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 3 Martha Rosler, "Negotiating New (His) Stories of Photography", *Art Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1994), doi:10.2307/777485.
- 4 Breman, Das and Agarwal, *Down and Out*, pp. 4–6.
- 5 T.J. Demos, "Creative Ecologies", *TAKE* (January 1, 2017).
- 6 Ravi Agarwal, "Resisting Technology; Regaining a Personal Ecology", *Sarai Reader 03* (2003).
- 7 documenta11 catalogue (Stuttgart: HatjeCantz Verlag, 2002), pp. 42–55.
- 8 Ravi Agarwal, *Ambient Seas: Occasional Notes from October 12, 2013 to August 17, 2015* (New Delhi: Gallery Espace, 2015).