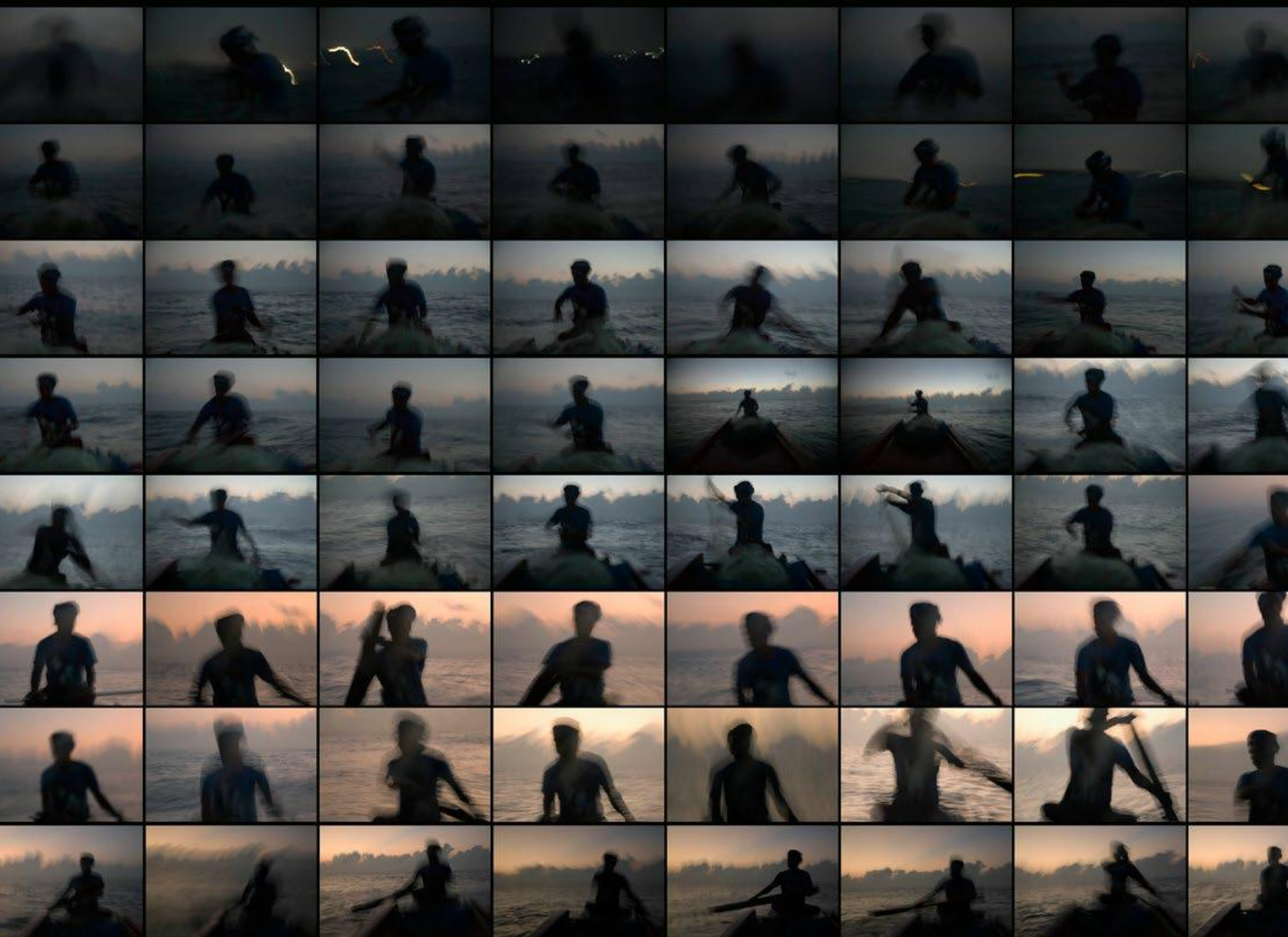






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Else, all will be still
Ravi Agarwal

Else, all
will be still

The Sea and the Self

*Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years,
Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe
Are brackish with the salt of human tears!
Thou shoreless flood, which in thy ebb and flow
Claspest the limits of mortality¹!*

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

Paeans of praise to nature, penned by poets such as Shelley and Wordsworth in the nineteenth century, were typical of the Romantic Movement. The wilderness or unspoilt nature is where the writer and the artist sought refuge. Here they could escape from the expanding urban areas and the crush of men and machines that the Industrial Revolution brought in its wake. By foregrounding the power of the individual imagination and intuition, Romanticism sought to counter the Age of Enlightenment's preoccupation with scientific and rational ideas. Instead, emotions that nature evoked such as awe, apprehension, horror and terror were translated into verse and paint. Who can forget the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich's dark, silhouetted figures in *Moonrise over the Sea*, their backs to the viewer, gazing at the glorious soft light suffusing the skies and the sea?

This construction of the idea of nature by the Romantics, which has informed much of how we think about it, comes under scrutiny by philosopher Timothy Morton in his book *Ecology without Nature*. In the chapter 'Romanticism and the Environmental Subject,' he writes, 'By setting up nature as an object "over there"—a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact—it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish. We could address this problem by considering the role of subjectivity in nature writing. What kinds of subject position does nature writing evoke? Instead of looking at the trees, look at the person who looks at the trees.'²

Morton's views finds resonances in Ravi Agarwal's recent body of works in *Else all will be still*. In it he interrogates the notion of the sea through the prism of a fisherman, Selvam, in a village near Pondicherry in Tamil Nadu, South India. Unlike his own instinctive reaction to the sea, which was one of wonder at its beauty, Agarwal discovered that the fishermen had a completely different understanding of it.

This realizationis writ large in his photographic work *Rhizome*, which depicts an installation he created on the seashore. In the soft pink light that plays upon the waters, rows of placards can be seen stuck into the sand, emblazoned with words that arose out of this interaction with the fishermen: "trawlers," "engine," "money," "climate change," "MLA," "diesel," "cyclone" and "crab" are some of the associations the fishermen have with the sea.

¹Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Time', *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Hutchinson 1914, Clarendon Press (Oxford University)

²Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, 2007

These words, which speak of the humdrum of daily life, dispel the romantic notion of the sea as an object of delight, separate and distant from the self. Instead, what comes into focus is the network of political, social, and economic entanglements and how nature is very much a lived relationship. As Agarwal notes, "The way the fisherman knows nature is through his relationship with it. He does not venture outside it. We can afford to romanticize it but the fisherman cannot afford to do so. In a sense the aesthetization and the ability to act on it beyond your immediate self also gives you the power to know it in a way that becomes beneficial for you. This dominant way of knowing something is part of your own social power."³

Where mindscape is landscape

For Agarwal the search is about exploring the idea of nature epistemologically and also delving into the very politics of it, "The category of nature is something you act upon, whether you like it or dislike it or visualize it, much like patriarchy. You act upon it, because you are located within it. How do you create an identity within that so you have to re-imagine the whole structure of power?"⁴

To seek out other forms of imagining nature, which pre-dated the age of industrialization, Agarwal turned to Sangam poems. This ancient form of Tamil poetry dating from the second century BCE to the second century CE consists of two strands, *Akam* and *Puram*, which are articulated in relation to each other. Each one is considered the Other and are complimentary aspects of a way of life. While *Akam* depicts the inner life, *Puram* stands for the exterior or the non-*Akam*. In *Akam* poetry nature is a reflection of the inner self, with the landscape reflecting inner emotions. Five types of land/mind-scapes are alluded to and named after different flowers/trees: *Kurinci* (hills), *Mullai* (pastures), *Marutam* (countryside), *Neithal* (seashore) and *Palai* (wasteland), which correspond to different phases of love namely the clandestine meeting of lovers, waiting in hope, sulking, pining and separation respectively. Each of them has their own particular ecosystem populated with special flora, fauna and even water bodies. *Neithal* for example, draws its name from the dark water lily.

Agarwal uses these five landscapes as titles for his series *Sangam Engines*, which depicts the innards of a boat engine, corroded by the ravages of time and tide. The bestowal of these titles on them meshes together the mechanical with the natural and the organic with the inorganic. Enshrining them in the centre of the frame, he accords these machine parts a position of pre-eminence, inviting the viewer to a closer reading and to uncover new details. Echoes of the autobiographical ring through, highlighting the artist's own varied interests—from his training as an engineer to his photographic and artistic practices, besides his engagement as an environmental activist.

³Author's conversation with Ravi Agarwal, March 2016

⁴Ibid

Apart from fishing, salt making is also an activity inscribed in the *Neithal* landscape. In *Salt Pan*, the skies are mirrored in grids of salty water formed as the furrows rush to meet at the horizon. Little white mounds serve as a reminder of the essential role salt plays in maintaining the body's equilibrium. In his diary *Ambient Seas*, which is a collection of his occasional notes and photographs spanning a period of two years, there is a piece of *Neithal* poetry that reads:

*The water lily,
Drooping,
With petals closed
Resembles the body
Of the green legged egret
Evening has come
Soon,
Darkness too
Will close in.*

The closing line of this poem is transformed into brass letters and embossed upon the planks of wood that make up the fisherman's simple catamaran. There is something ominous about it, a sign of doom that the very flimsiness of the wooden vessel appears to mirror.

Visual poetry also manifests itself in Sea, 6am, March 13, 2015 which presents the sea as a placid and unruffled beauty. The waters appear impossibly calm imbuing the photograph with a meditative quality. The horizon, that imaginary line where the sea mates with the sky, cleaves the frame into two. This is the sea the way Agarwal perceives and reads it, but would Selvam have read it that way? Or would the saying "still waters run deep" have run through his mind as he pondered the question of whether to put out to sea on March 13 or not?

Loves labour lost

Agarwal has long been preoccupied with the conditions of the labouring body, and its slippages between the material and the immaterial, as seen in his earlier documentary photographs of unorganized migrant labour in Gujarat or workers in the Bhatti mines in Delhi. As a natural corollary he now turns his lens, this time the video camera, on the tasks that Selvam performs through the day. These are seen in the videos *Shoreline I, II, III*, where his protagonist goes about his daily tasks of building boats, repairing his nets and fishing. It was on such fishing expeditions with Selvam in his rudimentary boat that Agarwal became acutely aware of how a shifting of spaces meant an exposure to his own vulnerabilities. All that separated him from the sea and possible doom were a few inches of fibreglass or wood. Here, face to face with the elements, his social and economic trappings were of no consequence. Reflecting on this he writes in *Ambient Seas*, "Above all, I think about my own vulnerability, my mortality and my insignificance....I have left my socio-political history and identity behind. The sea and my relationship to it has come down to basics. I have slipped from being an individual into my 'species' identity."

If Agarwal was confronted by the precariousness of life itself, there is also another kind of precariousness that haunts the fisher folk – that of sustenance and livelihoods. Foregrounding this is the rather cryptically titled *Engines – 20 KM*, a grid of twenty photographs, where engines occupy centrestage. Strapped onto boats and covered with colourful sheets of plastic or cloth, they are signifiers of a hierarchy that is prevalent among the fishing community. Only the more affluent can afford to invest in a bigger boat with an engine that enables them to travel 20 kilometers out to sea. This in turn implies a bigger catch and greater daily earnings. By focussing attention on the engines, Agarwal highlights that technology is not without its own issues of access. Coupling development with technology is often easier said than done. In his journal entry he writes, "Power and propulsion depends on who owns them and their economic status. Access to technology is not democratic. Capital overshadows labour. For some it is eternal labour."

While the engine-powered boats are framed against the backdrop of the waters of the sea, the humble catamaran performs a somersault against a bright blue sky in the three set *Ecological Manifesto*. Though not immediately apparent, three ecological statements from Agarwal's diary are inscribed into the heavens. In them Agarwal ruminates on a range of issues from poetry to cosmic time. Part of one reads, "What is the sea? Can it be heard? Can it be seen? Can we see it or know it beyond our 'eyes' and 'ears'? Can it ever be known fully?"

Testing alien waters

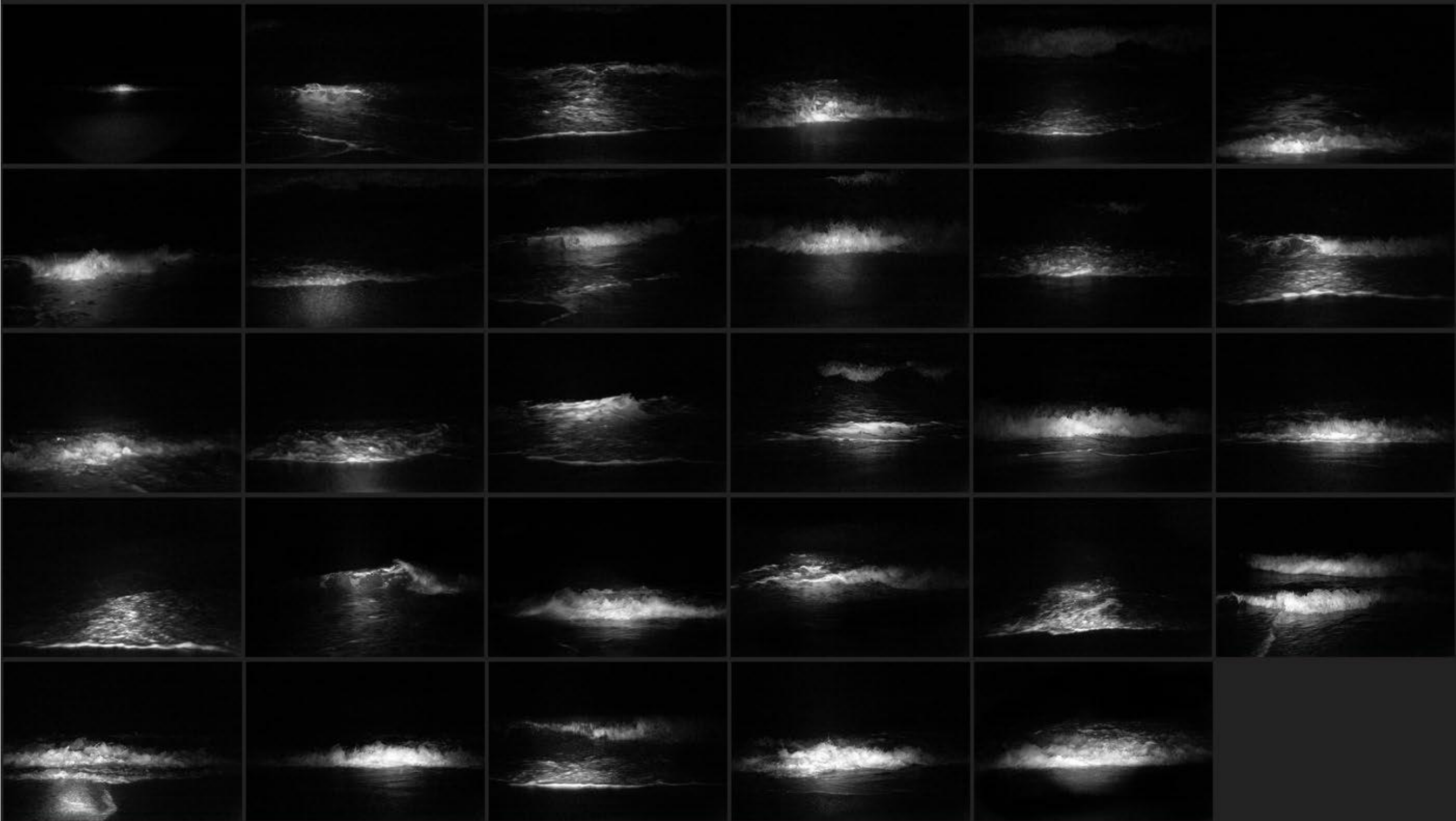
Lunar Tide, a set of 29 photographs meant to echo the lunar cycle, appears as an attempt to answer these very questions. What at first seems like a series of grainy, ultrasound images is in fact created by the gleam of a hand-held torch flashed into the inky-black waters of the sea. The viewer can only hazard a guess at what is visible and what could possibly lie beyond the pale pool of light. While the very attempt to plumb the depths of the sea and ferret out its secrets might appear like an exercise in futility, it is all the more urgent in the age of the Anthropocene. For unless radical new ways of reimagining ecology and nature are taken, we will continue to be trapped in the fallacy that nature is the Other, instead of us being embedded in it.

And sick of prey, yet howling on for more,
Vomitest thy wrecks on its inhospitable shore;
 Treacherous in calm, and terrible in storm,
 Who shall put forth on thee,
 Unfathomable Sea ?

Meera Menezes, April 2016

Lunar Tide

Variable matrix of 29 archival photographic prints
17.5 x 26.5 inches (each)
2015



Engines

Variable matrix of 20 archival photographic prints
15 x 23 inches (each)
2015



Ecological Manifesto

Set of 3 archival photographic prints
21.5 x 32 inches (each)
2015



Rhizome

Archival photographic print
31.5 x 48 inches
2015



Sangam Engine

Set of 5 archival photographic prints
15 x 23 inches (each)
2015



marutam



mullai



neidal



pallai



kurinji

The Sea. 6 am, 13th March, 2015

Archival photographic print
60 x 80 inches
2015



No one asked me

Photographic print lightbox
18.5 x 19.5 inches
2015



loss of land-based ice due to increased melting. Global sea level rose by about 120 m during the several millennia that followed the end of the last ice age (approximately 21,000 years ago), and stabilised between 3,000 and 2,000 years ago. Sea level indicators suggest that global sea level did not change significantly from then until the late 19th century. The instrumental record of modern sea level change shows evidence for onset of sea level rise during the 19th century. Estimates for the 20th century show a rise of about 1.8 mm per year in a typical model projection. Thermal expansion is projected to contribute more than half of the average sea level rise, but land ice will lose mass increasingly rapidly as the century progresses. An important uncertainty relates to whether discharge of ice from the ice sheets will continue to increase as a consequence of accelerated ice flow has been observed in recent years. This would add to the amount of sea level rise, but quantitative projection of how much it would add cannot be made with confidence, owing to limited understanding of the relevant



Salt Pan

Archival photographic print
34 x 103 inches
2015

Catamaran

Wood, rope & brass
2015



- 1 **Shoreline I**
(18 min 46 sec)
- 2 **Shoreline II**
(15min 22 sec)
- 3 **Shoreline III**
(14 min 31 sec)
- 4 **Sea of Sand**
(36 min. 34 sec)

1



2



3



4



Diary

Ambient Seas
Notes from October 2013 to August 2015

With 6 black and white photographic
prints on the wall 8 x 7 inches (each)
& 4 colour prints on the wall each
9 x 7 inches (each), 2016



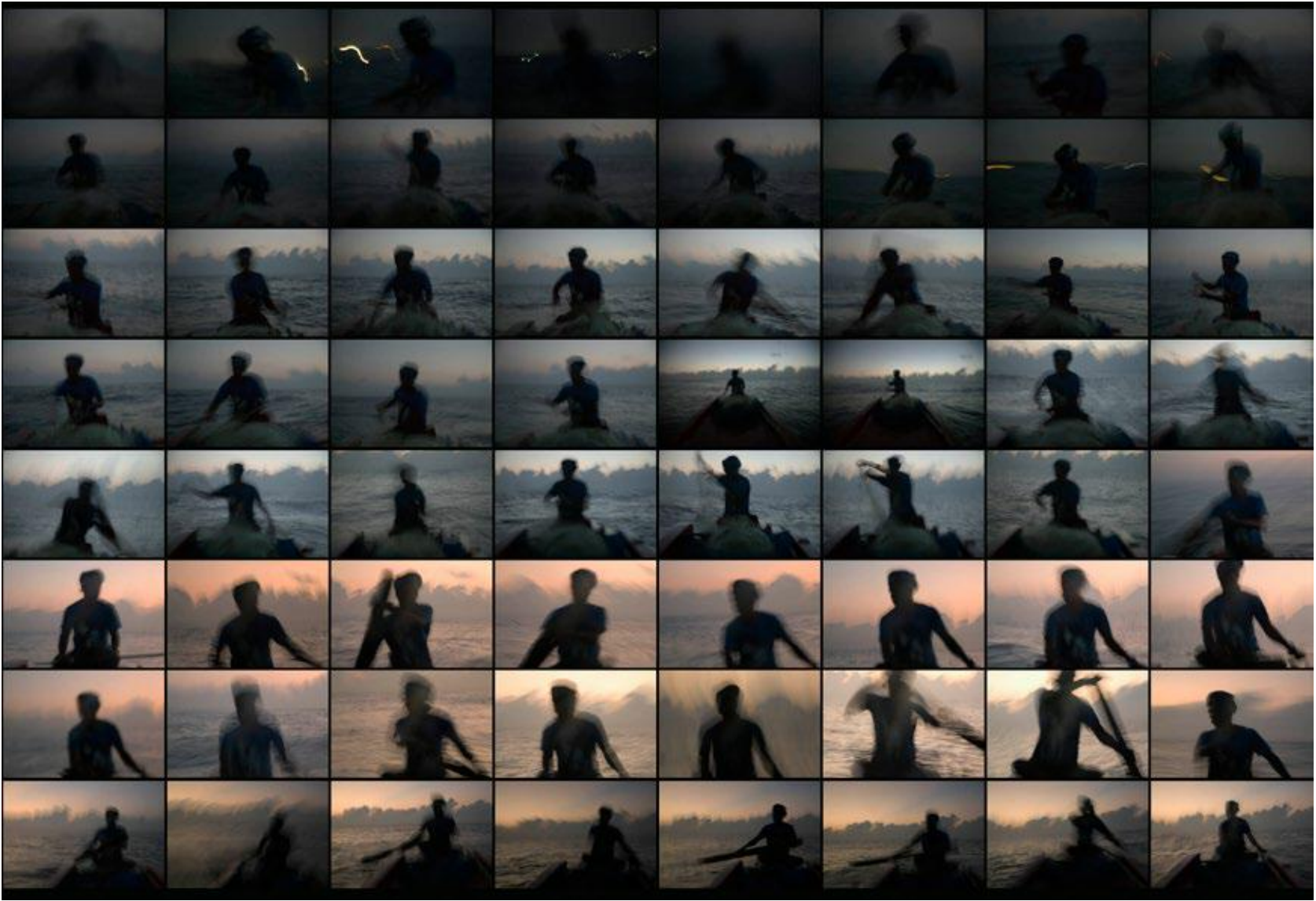
Co-ordinates

Archival photographic print
14.5 x 41 inches
2016



4 am

Archival photographic print
26 x 37.5 inches
2016



Fishing nets drying

Archival photographic print
24 x 36 inches
2016



1/100 s

Series of 8 archival
photographic prints
6 x 8 inches (each)
2016



Artist’s note

Two years back, I had a close encounter with the sea, a first for an inland urban person. It continues. The ‘ground’ changing experiences, led me to further my ongoing explorations about the man-nature relationship and the question – What is nature?

The pursuit revealed new ways of imagining. I was led to ancient Tamil Sangam akam love poetry, where five landscapes. *Kurinji* - mountains, *Mullai*- forests, *Marutam* – agricultural lands, *Neithal*- sea, *Palai* – desert, became an internal terrain of feelings - sexual union, yearning, sulking, pining, and separation, through its short direct verse. The outside became inside as object and subject co-formed each other.

Today, the planet is in an ecological crisis. Nature has been reduced to an object which can only be ‘acted’ upon through it being ‘extracted,’ ‘admired,’ ‘enjoyed,’ etc. but not ‘lived’ with. The relationship is one of power. Capitalism, technology, mass production, resource exploitation, all have prospered though this positioning. Wilderness has been privatized, forests fenced, rivers tamed, and animals made extinct. There seems no going back from consumption, and progress. It is the age of the power of man, the Anthropocene. No one can guarantee future survival.

The entrenched oppositional binary needs to be questioned and other positions with nature recovered. Deluze’s with his idea of positive difference, Guattari’s thesis on three ecologies, Tim Morton’s rejection of ‘nature’ itself, or the Buddhist proposition of a non- dual self, offer clues to where one can look. Nature defined merely by science needs to be read alongside ideas of mortality, fragility, vulnerability, balance, equity and democracy.

The works are an outcome of my struggle to comprehend the times we inhabit. Fishermen friends helped me navigate new waters.’ The ever changing sea led me to these explorations. Urgency is in the air. Else, all will be still.

RAVI AGARWAL

Ravi Agarwal is a photographer artist, writer, curator and environmentalist. He explores issues of urban space, ecology and capital in interrelated ways working with photographs, video, performance, on-site installations and public art.

Agarwal has shown in several international shows including Documenta XI (2002), Kassel, Germany, Horn Please (Berne 2007) Indian Highway (2009 ongoing) as well as several national shows and solo shows. Agarwal co-curated a twin city public art show, YamunaElbe.Public.Art.Outreach. He writes extensively on ecological issues, and is also founder of the leading Indian environmental NGO Toxics Link.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011	Of Value and Labour, The Guild, Mumbai
2010-11	Flux: dystopia, utopia, heterotopia. Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2008	An Other Place, Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2006	Alien Waters, India International Centre, New Delhi
2000	Down and Out, Labouring under Global Capitalism, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi; The Hutheesingh Visual Arts Gallery, Ahmedabad, Gujrat, India; National Vakbondsmuseum, Amsterdam
1995	A Street View, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi

MUSEUM / INSTITUTIONAL EXHIBITIONS

2015	The Eye and the Mind: New Interventions in Contemporary Art” curated by Rajeev Lochan, Director, National Gallery of Modern Art, India at Gaung dong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, 2014, Beijing, Shanghai , 2015, China
2014-15	End of the World Biennial (Bienal del Fin del Mundo), curated Massimo Scaringella Argentina and Chile, 2015
2014	Free River Zone, Goethe Institute, New York, 2014
2104	Sahamat, Curated Vivan Sundaram, New Delhi, 2014
2013	Convergence: Contemporary Art from India and the Diaspora. Curated Kathryn Myers. The William Bentley Museum of Art, School of Fine Arts, Connecticut, USA
2013	Water – curated Gayatri Sinha, Europalia, Belgium, October 2013
2013	Sharjah Biennial 11 May 2013
2013	Zones of Contact propositions for the Museum. Co-curated by Vidya 2012 Sivadas, Akansha Rastogi, Deekshanath. KiranNadar Museum Of Art, Noida.

2012	Eye of the needle,
2012	Newtopia, curated Katherina Gregos, various museums venues, Mechelen
2012	Critical Mass, Contemporary Art from India, curated Rotem Ruff, Tel Aviv Museum of Contemporary Art May 2012
2011-14	Z.N.E, Examples to Follow, curated Adrienne Goehler,Traveling exhibition, Mumbai, Adis Ababba, Beijing. Sao Paulo, Berlin
2011	Generation in Transition. New Art from India curated by Magda Kardasz, Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithunia
2011	Generation in Transition, New Art from India, curated Madga Kardasz, Zacheta National Gallery for Art, Warsaw, Poland
2011	The Eye is a Lonely Hunter, Images of Humankind, curated Katerina Gregos and Solvej Helweg Ovesen, Fotofestival Mannheim_Ludwigshafen_ Heidelberg, Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany
2011	After the Crash, curated Camilla Boehimo, Orto Botanico Museum, Rome
2010	Where Three Dreams Cross, curated Sunil Gupta et al, Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Winterthur Fotomuseum, Switzerland
2009	Astonishment of Being, curated Deeksha Nath, Birla Academy for Arts and Culture, Kolkotta
2008/	12 Indian Highway, curated Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gunnar Kvaran, traveling exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London (2008); Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, Norway (2009); HEART Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark (2010); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon-France (2011); MAXXI, Rome, Italy (2011), Bejing
2008	Extinct part of 48deg C, Public Eco-Art International festival, New Delhi, curated Pooja Sood,
2008	Still/Moving Image, curated Deeksha Nath, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
2007	Frieze Art Fair, Khoj Artists Workshop Stall, London
2007	Horn Please, The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art ,curated Bernhard Fibicher, Suman Gopinath, Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.
2007	Public Places, Private Spaces, curated Gayatri Sinha, Zetta Emmons and Paul Sternberger, Newark Museum, Newark and Minneapolis (2008) USA.
2006	Watching Me Watching India curated by Gayatri Sinha and Celina Lunsford, Frankfurt Fotografie International, Frankfurt, Germany
2003	Crossing Generations: DiVERGE: Forty years of Gallery Chemould, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, curated by Geeta Kapoor and Chaitanya Sambrani
2002	Documenta XI, curated Okwui Enwezor, Kassel, Germany
1996	2nd Biennial of Creative Photography, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS	
2014	Urban Utopia, curated Lyla Rao, Birla Museum of Art and Culture, Kolkota,
2014	Zameen, curated Ranjit Hoskote, Art District XIII, New Delhi, October 2014
2012	The Secret life of plants, curated by Maya Kovskaya, Exhibit 320, New Delhi.
2012	Art HK, presented by The Guild Gallery, Mumbai
2012	Chennai Art Fair, presented by The Guild Gallery, Mumbai
2012	India Art Summit, presented by Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2011	Staging Selves - Power, Performativity & Portraiture, curated Maya Kovskaya, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai
2011	Tolstoy Farm, curated Gayatri Sinha, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
2011	2011 Project Y. Yamuna-Elbe Public.Art.Outreach, Hamburg and Delhi, Oct/Nov 2011. co-curated with Till Krause (www.yamuna-elbe.de)
2011	India Art Summit, presented by Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2010	CWG, Sports and the City, curated Rupika Chawla, LKA, New Delhi
2009	Detour, curated Ranjit Hoskote, Gallery Chemould, New Delhi
2009	The Purple Wall, curated Gayatri Sinha, India Art Summit, 2009
2009	Recycle, curated Bhavna Vij, Travencore House, New Delhi, Nature Morte, Kolkota
2008	Click! Contemporary Photography in India, curated Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, Vadehra Gallery, New Delhi
1995	First National Exhibition of Photography, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
1993	Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition, Bombay, India.

CURATION

2011	Project Y. Yamuna-Elbe Public.Art.Outreach, Hamburg and Delhi, Oct/Nov 2011. co-curated with Till Krause (www.yamuna-elbe.de)
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BOOKS AND CATALOGUES

Yamuna Manifesto ed. Ravi Agarwal and Till Krause, 2013	
Chemicals, Environment, Health: A Global Management Perspective co authored, Taylor and Francis, 2011	
Flux: Dystopia, Utopia, Heterotopia, Gallery Espace, 2011	
In the Shadow of the Vulture, 48 deg C, Public Eco Art, Goethe Institute, New Delhi, 2009	
Have you seen the flowers on the river ?, Khoj, New Delhi	

Immersion. Emergence, Youthreach, New Delhi, 2007
Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism , co-edited, Jan Breman et al, Oxford University Press and Amsterdam, University Press, 2000
Making a Difference, A collection of essays, ed. Rukmani Shekhar, Spic Mackay, New Delhi, 1998
Portfolios in The India Magazine, 1995 and 1997
Portfolio in The First City Magazine, 2003
Monthly Photo Column in First City Magazine, since Feb 2005

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 1. Fight for a Forest, Nature without Borders, ed. Mahesh Ranagarajan and M.D.Madhusudan, September 2014
- 2. Contemporary Flows, Fluid Times, Art Fair Magazine, February 2011
- 3. Hi Tech Heaps, Forsaken Lives (co-authored), Challenging the Chip, Labour Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry, ed Ted Smith et al, Temple University Press, USA, 2007
- 4. Standardised, packaged, ready for consumption, Sarai Reader 05, Bare Acts, Sarai – CSDS, Delhi, 2005
- 5. Beyond environmental standards, from techno centric to people centric environmental governance. Troubles Times, Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extremes.” SDPI, Islamabad, 2006
- 6. Resisting technology, regaining and a personal ecology, Sarai Reader, 03, Shaping Technologies, 2003
- 7. Corporate Social responsibility, a critical perspective from India, Cometische humanisering? Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistic University Press, Amsterdam, 2005
- 8. Walk on the Wild Side, (co-authored) Green Book, ed Ruskin Bond, Roli Books, 2003

REVIEWS / ARTICLES

- 1. Flash Art, March April, 2011, Rajashree Biswal
- 2. Art India, Volume XV, 2010-11, Roles People Play, Meera Menezes
- 3. Art India, Volume XV, 2010-11, The Nature of the Beast, Janice Pariat
- 4. Art India, Volume XIV, 2009-10, Images with Conscience, Meera Menezes

Public Collections:

The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

The William Bentley Museum of Art, Connecticut, USA

OTHER

Conceived and organized:
Yamuna – Elbe, Art and ecology seminar, December 2010, Goethe Institute, New Delhi (www.yamuna-elbe.org)
Invited to: Arts Residency, Basel, Pro Helvetia, 2009, Khoj Peers Arts Residency, 2007, 2014
Awarded: IFCS- UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety, 2008, Ashoka Fellowship,
social entrepreneurship, 1997

