

Else all will be Still:

Dematerialisation and Rematerialisation in the Ecological
Photography of Ravi Agarwal

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In 1973, artist/critic Lucy Lippard published a book that made a huge impact on the nascent debates about “dematerialisation” in contemporary conceptual art.¹ In fields such as economics, the concept meant a decrease in the quantities of materials needed to perform basic social functions. In the art world, it meant shift towards an art making untethered from the production of an easily commodifiable aesthetic object. This opened up into the performative, the interactive, the processual, textual, and ideational, rather than merely representational or expressive, often bringing together fragmented, ephemeral assemblages to intervene into a situation rather than simply to depict or describe it. While many movements in contemporary art have come and gone since then, dematerialisation as a drive to decentre the importance of the object production as the *sin qua non* outcome of the art-making process, has never really gone away. It continues, in a variety of forms across many disciplines, from institutional critique and relational aesthetics, to art practices in the photographic world that are not primarily focused on the production of aesthetic representation, and instead use the lens to engage with questions of power, and the photographic medium as a way of capturing dynamic processes, driving forces, and underlying logics that structure our world in consequential ways today.

Such dematerialisation in art practice is not actually at odds with the rise of “new materialism” in philosophy and critical theory, which uses concepts

such as “agential realism,” “intra-action,” and “onto-epistemology” to theoretically address our mutual entanglement with the world and our systems of knowledge.² A look at certain arcs of engagement and photographic practice of Ravi Agarwal can show the fruitful co-existence of both dematerialisation and a return to materiality in a rich body of acclaimed artwork that spans three decades of mutual entanglement with the world of matter, practice, and ideas.

Ravi Agarwal’s work as an influential environmentalist critically informs his project as an artist with a strongly lens-based visual practice, but not in the clichéd manner of an activist seeking to use art as an instrument of agitprop. Although he is deeply invested in affecting social, political and economic change, his artworks have never been propaganda posters advocating his desired outcomes. Trained as an engineer, Ravi Agarwal’s interest in both ecology and photography became life-long vectors of his preoccupation with solving problems in ways that engineering never could. Understanding that the power of the aesthetic and the political, the conceptual and cultural could never be transformed through the technocratic rationality of the engineer who is primarily concerned with devising the most efficient means to achieve pre-set ends, Agarwal believes that it is precisely necessary to question those ends, and reshape our means in the service of a reconceptualised relationship between nature, self, and culture, politics, economics, society, and art is particularly

well suited to this challenge.

So what is the character of Agarwal’s photographic art practice and how does it both dematerialise the focal points of the lens and yet return to the materiality of the world at the same time? First, at its core is a focus on the underlying processes and logics at work that structure the relationships between human beings and the material world. Individual images are not merely representations of specific, concrete people, places and things, but instantiations of larger patterns and power relations, ideational and value systems that form the structures of everyday life. Here the dematerialised social, economic, ideological, and political intertwined with the ideational and conceptual are rematerialised in their lived, embodied enactments in everyday life.

To explore how this works, I’d like to show how Agarwal’s core focus on these dematerialised processes and flows of ideas, practices and power that transcend the individual specific instances that appear across several series, actually returns us to a focus the material limits of our own existence.

The Labouring Body as Nature

Both Agarwal’s first internationally-acclaimed body of work, *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism* (1997-2000)³ and his *Bhatti Mines* series (2002-2003)⁴ explored the vicissitudes of economic and political forces, or what he has called “the interstices of human politics and survival,”⁵ on the labouring bodies of marginalised people. In the former series,

Left side image: Ravi Agarwal, *Fishing Nets Drying*, Digital photographic print, 2015.



Ravi Agarwal, From the installation, *Extinct?*, Digital photographic prints, 2009.

these were migrants in the countryside of South Gujarat doing hard labour to eke out a living. And in the latter series, a community of Oud people who had lived on the margins of Delhi for thirty years and were struggling against municipal attempts to abject and expel them from the urban body politic as “squatters” and “slum-dwellers.”

Rather than juxtaposing human beings to nature as either an externalised force or passive setting for human action, Agarwal focused on the capacity of the labouring body as the bearer of subsistence, survival, indeed life. Precisely because it is mortal, Agarwal treats the human body as nature. In his vision, the body is always something that is both natural and part of nature, and hence subject to the visceral needs of all life.

Species-level Mortality and the Extinction of India's Vultures

Agarwal's work continued to explore mortality and the

frailty of flesh in his series on the extinction of the vultures on the Indian subcontinent. *Extinct? In the Shadow of the Vulture: An Extinction of Memory* (2008) offered a look at species-level mortality in the form of public art intervention.⁶ This work extended his earlier focus on the material intertwining of bodily vulnerability and capability, as well as human culpability, and foreshadowed his later work

on anthropogenically-driven ecosystem loss.

In *Extinct?*, Agarwal offered a fragmented assemblage of documents relating to the species-death of this majestic creature after nearly 100 million years of its existence. Archival materials accompany the few images of living vultures he was able to shoot, creating a rich intertextuality that is later echoed in his work *Ambient Seas* (2013-2015). Journal notes about how the NSAID drug diclofenac is used in the dairy industry, causing widespread kidney failure in the vultures that consumed the flesh of dead cattle, and how the economic calculus of market mentality allows the eradication of entire species. Images of binoculars and slides, historical photographs, pictures of photographs of the disappearing birds in public space, scribbles and sketches, all accompany the images of the critically endangered vulture.

As we will see with Agarwal's work on the salt pans of Pondicherry, whole webs of



Ravi Agarwal, *Forest Walk II*, Set of 12 images, Size variable, Digital photographic prints, 2012.

life's multiplicities lurk inside seeming singularities. The vulture, which is vanishing even faster than the Dodo did,⁷ leaves a huge hole in the urban ecosystem of which it was a critical part. No longer able to perform the function of urban public sanitisers, a population bomb of rats and wild dogs has burst upon the nation, and their disappearance, the diseases such as anthrax, rabies, and plague have spread exponentially.⁸ The extinction of the vulture in India, then, is not merely an isolated tragedy, but also a "public health crisis," costing the State the equivalent of "34 billion US dollars (as of 2015)."⁹

Nature-Culture of the River and the Forest

Just as the capitalism is a kind of cannibalism feasting upon the labouring body politic, and the extinction of the vulture is implicated in an enormous public health crisis that has direct harms to human beings, so too must we understand the death of rivers and loss of forests as harm to ourselves, not merely injury to something outside of and unrelated to us.

In Agarwal's *Alien Waters* series (2004-2006), he meditates on the onto-epistemological intersection of nature-culture through changing relationships between the self and the river that is the lifeblood of the city. Evoking the Hindu rituals of life and death that treat the river as a sacred space of ablution and dissolution, as living pilgrims and cremated bodies are both immersed alike, he asks what the river means to us now that it is polluted to death itself? Who are we,



Ravi Agarwal, *Sangam Engine* series, Digital photographic print, 2015.

and what does our living and dying mean in the context of our indifference to the (tenuous) life and (humanly caused) death of our rivers?¹⁰

In his *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* (2007-2011), Agarwal photographs the complex, interlocking social, cultural and economic and agricultural ecosystems of traditional, organic, small-scale marigold farming families along the Yamuna river, whose way of life is now being displaced as skyrocketing real estate values push them off their land. He explores "a meta-narrative of global financial flows and its institutions of capital, technology and markets," which are often treated as an unmitigated good; as unquestionable "Progress." He poses the critical question: "If 'economy' is replaced with 'ecology,' might 'new relationships' be constituted 'with nature at the centre?'" What counts as "development has to be re-thought" taking into account "additional values like 'equity' and 'balance,'

and not merely monetary ones." He notes that "the farmers are caught in a bind as their local economies now have to compete with the global imagination of a future," and "the fertility of capital has overtaken the fertility of land."¹¹

In his 2012 *Forest Walk* (I and II), Agarwal brings text to his images of this fertile, feral land, allowing us to narrate for ourselves the interconnected meanings of the words, which can be read in any order—*here, this, not, you, not, is, a forest, a tree, are, is, a tree, not, this*. The images they accompany are a grid of twelve photographs taken in the Delhi Ridge Forest, which remains at the centre of the city and is over a billion years old. For Agarwal, the embeddedness of the forest within the city is homologous to our embeddedness in nature. It confounds the idea of us as separate from nature. He reminds us that Delhi was founded where it is in large part because of that forest. When we encroach on it and parcel it up, as we have now, into four separate pieces,



Ravi Agarwal, *Salt Pan*, Digital photographic print, 2015.

are we not also performing a vivisection on ourselves, just as consuming the value extracted from labouring bodies pushed to their limit and killing off species, as well as rivers and forests that are integral to the holistic functioning of our cities is a kind of self-mutilation? If all that is solid melts into air, the dematerialised is rematerialised through Agarwal's photography when the macro-processes shaping the world that figure in the artwork are grounded in the onto-epistemological bedrock of his "agential realism," to borrow Philosopher/Physicist Karen Barad's new materialist terms, in which we and nature are treated as co-constitutive, "mutually entangled," "intra-actional agents," rather than

interacting existentially and ontologically distinct entities.

Different ways of Knowing: We and the Sea

In his haunting document, *Ambient Seas (Occasional Notes From October 12, 2013 to August 17 2015)*, Agarwal writes with poetic urgency about his encounter with the sea in Tamil Nadu, calling it a "ground changing experience." This contributed to his "on-going explorations about ideas [that] constitute nature," and his preoccupation with the "ecological crisis" that this threatening the very future of not only our species, but of vast swathes of the natural world, whole intra-dependent ecosystems, as

well as life forms and ways of life. Invoking the concept of the Anthropocene, he sides with the portion of the scientific community that pegs the starting point of this "age of man's" geological, planetary, systemic-level causality at the Industrial Revolution, in which, as he describes it, "technology and capital combined to create economies based on natural resource extraction and waste generation on a massive scale, using fossil fuel energy."¹²

Agarwal questions the dominant response among those who have accepted the Anthropocene thesis—that technological innovation can create "new markets for environmental solutions," which will somehow get us

out of the mess we have made. Even the most green technological solutions are still "based on the same trajectory of extraction, consumption and waste." He questions why we fear ideas of constrained consumption and limited growth as regressive, and argues that "rethinking a foundational human—nature relationship could be more critical to future sustainability than merely creating better markets."¹³

Throughout this major project, Agarwal's thinking about the diffuse, elusive, but extremely consequential relationships between our way of life and the natural world, reaches a culmination of the trajectory he has been on since the beginning. We



can see Agarwal triangulate his photographic gaze across intersecting, intra-acting, and mutually constituting conceptions of selfhood, society, the good life, life itself, public and private, that operate within out conceptual systems and practices of everyday life. These he positions in relation to the undeniable agency of natural systems themselves. He explores how humans' exploitation of one another—through patriarchy, slavery, colonialism, and market economics—and our attempts to “privatise” nature and “civilise” the wilderness are deeply enmeshed with one another, and not so discrete as we might think, comparing notions of domination of nature to power relations at the core of

patriarchy.¹⁴

So how do we rethink these intertwined relationships so that they might cease to be exploitative, violent and destructive? Agarwal's engagement with the fishing community near Pondicherry led him to think about embodied knowledge systems, ancient conceptual arrangements that lie deep in the heart of quotidian practices and the challenges to those ancient systems in today's world. Can we find traces of these other ways of conceiving of the self, nature, power, and our mutual survival in the lived experiences of people whose lives and livelihoods are still so clearly integrated with the life of the ecosystems on which they subsist? Can

we retrieve and reclaim elements of ancient thought that might be usable today to make tomorrow more liveable? To answer these questions, Agarwal moved back and forth between the concrete embodied practices of local fishermen, and the abstract cosmological implications of ancient Sangam Tamil poetry, against the backdrop global processes in which we are all enmeshed.

Thinking through these two related yet distinct modes of thought and action, and using his camera, Agarwal has captured instantiations of the dematerialised flows of global economic forces, epochal and epistemic shifts at a geological time scale writ small in the everyday

of these fishermen in their encounters with the sea; finding moments of visual poetry that echo the lyrical love for the natural world so redolent in ancient Sangam poetry without romanticising the crisis fishermen face.

A brief description of one work that came out of this intense engagement will hopefully show facets of this interweaving of the powerful, the practical, the poetic, and the philosophical. At the centre of our story is the true main protagonist, who is neither the artist, nor the fisherman, but rather the sea.

How to see the life of the sea? Agarwal's works approach the ocean from many different paths –

through beaches that form shifting boundaries between land and sea; through boats (Foucault's classic icon of heterotopia), old and new, used to traverse it; and through various means of propulsion into the ocean that are life-chance changing for the fishermen in the short run – technologies such as engines, fishing nets, and other tools that assist in extending the reach of the fishermen and expanding the ambit of their "harvest," mean that far more fish can be caught. But the same means are also life-chance changers in the long-run, as overfished seas are depleted, and when combined with other cause-effects of the Anthropocene—climate change, rising sea levels, the warming, acidification and plastification of the oceans, jellyfish and algae blooms, destruction of complex ecosystems such as coral reefs, disruption of elemental food chain components such as plankton—the life chances of the fishermen who rely on the sea become as at-risk as the sea is itself.

This paradoxical temporal disconnect between immediate gain and long term loss, as well as our shared mortality, underscores the problems that Agarwal is trying to highlight in critiquing the notion of human beings as outside of nature, of nature under our dominion, and of nature and culture being ontologically epistemologically and distinct. The mutually constitutive plight of the fishermen and the plight of the sea becomes a powerful metonym for our ecological crisis at large and a reminder that to survive we must change how we understand our relationship to nature,

and how we live that change out in our everyday lives and economic practices.

I would like to close with a look at Agarwal's image, *Salt Pan* (2015). In this image, we see the ladder-like formation of a humanly sculpted saltpan, with mounds of earth separating sections of saline water that reflects the sky above, and piles of dehydrated salt interspersed throughout.

What is it that we are seeing? Do we understand how critical the naturally occurring tidal salt marshes are to coastal ecosystems and how much is lost when we disrupt them? These salt flats, salt pans, or salt marshes are often seen as "wastelands" to be reclaimed for "productive" human use. Yet these form ecologically critical intertidal zones that mediate land and seas. Far from dead, as we often imagine, these tidal salt flats are ecosystems that are as highly productive as tropical rainforests. They support both terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna, ranging from bacteria to mammals. They are photosynthetic agents, and act as depositories for organic matter and sites of essential decomposition processes that are vital to the aquatic web of life, delivering nutrients that feed a huge variety of organisms in coastal waters. The existence of undisrupted salt marshes, then, form a critical rung on a ladder of complexly interconnected systems of life that cannot function properly if its rungs are broken.

There is a precision and beauty to this symbiotic chain of life and such coastal salt flats offer an index of ecological health

in the relationship between land and sea. And this is precisely how Agarwal's photographic work, which captures instantiations of dematerialised flows of mutually inextricable processes and forces that shape the world, also bring us back to the irreducible materiality of life—ours, that of other species, indeed, that of all of nature. And in that intertwined mutual material contingency and shared mortality, are we and nature not one and the same body and being? Framed this way, as Agarwal's lifetime of work challenges us to do, perhaps we must rethink the ways that ecocide and suicide not merely linguistic twins, but existential synonyms.

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3. Jan Breman and Ravi Agarwal, *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, eds., Jan Breman et al. Oxford University Press and Amsterdam, University Press, 2000. This series was selected by curator Okwui Enwezor for *DOCUMENTA XI* (2002).
4. Bhatti Mines was shown for the first time in my exhibition *Staging Selves: Power, Performativity, and Portraiture* (Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, 2011).
5. Agarwal, Ravi. "Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism (1997-2000)," Artist Text, www.raviagarwal.com
6. Extinct? was Agarwal's contribution to the major ecological public art project *48 Degrees* (2008), spearheaded and organized by Delhi's Khoj International Artists Workshop.
7. "Conserving South Asia's Threatened Vultures". *Save Our Species*. Accessed December 14, 2015.
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11. Agarwal, Ravi. "Have you seen the flowers on the river? (2007-2011)," Artist Text, www.raviagarwal.com.
12. Agarwal, Ravi. *Ambient Seas: Occasional Notes From October 12, 2013 to August 17 2015*, p8.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

Images courtesy: The artist.