



Extinct?—An Art Intervention by Ravi Agarwal in Delhi

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To cite this article: Russell Stephens (2018) *Extinct?—An Art Intervention by Ravi Agarwal in Delhi*, Art Journal, 77:2, 28-51, DOI: [10.1080/00043249.2018.1495531](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2018.1495531)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2018.1495531>



Published online: 05 Sep 2018.



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Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, two taxidermy Oriental white-backed vultures consuming a deer, installation view, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art. Ecology*, National Museum of Natural History, New Delhi (artwork © Ravi Agarwal; photograph provided by the artist)

Extinct?—An Art Intervention by Ravi Agarwal in Delhi

This essay was originally developed for an art history graduate seminar in fall 2012, on modern art in Southern Asia, led by Katherine Hacker at the University of British Columbia. Various forms have also been presented at the 2014 “Documents of Culture/Documents of Barbarism” graduate symposium at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the 2016 “Local Revolutions” PhD symposium at the University of California, San Diego. I thank the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions. In particular I thank Prof. Hacker for the considerable direction, encouragement, and assistance she has provided in the formulation and development of this project.

1. Ravi Agarwal, “Artist’s Talk,” Delhi Photo Festival, 2011, 11:57–13:14, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL1nQqWZ3Ok>, as of June 10, 2018. NB: the video recording contains a disjuncture between audio and picture.

2. See “48 Degrees Public.Art.Ecology,” at www.48c.org/, as of June 10, 2018.

3. See “48 Degrees Celsius,” Curating Cities: A Database of Eco Public Art, at <http://eco-publi-cart.org/48-degrees-celsius/>, as of June 11, 2018.

4. See “Spaces,” at www.48c.org/spaces.html, as of June 10, 2018; “India PM Launches Delhi Metro,” *BBC News World Edition*, December 24, 2002, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2602907.stm as of June 14, 2018.

5. Ravi Agarwal is the founding director of Toxics Link, an environmental non-governmental organization that presents information on toxic substances in the environment. See “It’s Hot,” *First City Magazine*, Delhi, December 2008, 196; and Toxics Link website, at <http://toxicslink.org/>, as of June 10, 2018.

6. The five critically endangered species of South Asian vulture are *Gyps bengalensis*, the Oriental white-backed vulture; *Gyps indicus*, the long-billed vulture; *Gyps tenuirostris*, the slender-billed vulture; *Sarcogyps calvus*, the red-headed vulture; and *Neophron percnopterus*, the Egyptian vulture. “What Is SAVE?” SAVE, at www.save-vultures.org/what-is-save/, as of June 9, 2018.

Ravi Agarwal’s 2008 art piece *Extinct?* was located at two separate sites in New Delhi—the National Museum of Natural History on Barakhamba Road, and outdoors at a nearby busy, parklike traffic roundabout, a few hundred meters from the museum grounds.¹ Agarwal’s work was part of a larger group show entitled *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology*, for which twenty-five artists—fifteen from India and ten from other countries—were enlisted to construct art pieces on

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the theme of the environment in urban public spaces within Delhi.² Among them were the Indian artists Vivan Sundaram, who built a large, trash-themed raft, *Floatage*, from thousands of clear plastic disposable water bottles, and Krishnaraj Chonat, whose *Crane + Tree* consisted of a large, uprooted, denuded tree suspended from a construction hoist.³ The eight separate exhibition locations,

which ranged from Mandi House in the south to Roshanara Bagh in the north, were selected with respect to their accessibility through the city’s new metro system, the first phase of which had just been completed in 2006.⁴ Agarwal, both a photo-based artist and an environmental activist, had been party to the decision to use the metro as an ecologically friendly hub for the citywide exhibition.⁵

Extinct?

The title of Agarwal’s own piece, *Extinct?*, refers to the catastrophic decline of vultures across India, as five species have almost completely vanished from the subcontinent.⁶ In the early 1990s, the estimated population of the scavenger birds numbered between 100 and 160 million.⁷ By the mid 2000s, some fifteen years later, declines in some species had run as high as 99.9 percent.⁸ The disappearance of the vultures has resulted in disastrous socioeconomic and ecological impacts. During the 1980s, the number of livestock in India exceeded 400 million head.⁹ Hindus in India venerate the cow as a symbol of both religious and communal identity, and do not eat beef.¹⁰ The repercussions of this situation have been highly politicized within the country’s history.¹¹ When they were still abundant, vultures functioned as the ecological mechanism for the annual consumption of 20 million tons of carrion.¹² With the sudden collapse of the vulture population, these carcasses were no longer disposed of in an effective and efficient manner. As a consequence, feral dogs, which sometimes attack and bite humans and are a major source of rabies in India, began to increase substantially as they moved in to fill the vacated environmental niche.¹³

Détournement

Agarwal’s artwork on the plight of the country’s vultures pivots around the conceptual problem of evoking a missing subject. How does an artist, particularly one whose practice is grounded in photography, depict something the very absence of which is the reason for one’s attention? The modernist strategies that Agarwal invokes include the Situationist-like use of the act of institutional intervention—*détournement*—coupled with the Duchampian concept of the ready-made.¹⁴ In order to evoke the vanished subject of vultures, he elects to target the only such birds still left in Delhi—the stuffed and dusty specimens on display

विलुप्त ? EXTINCT ?



Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, installation views, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology*, National Museum of Natural History, New Delhi (artwork © Ravi Agarwal; photographs provided by Sanjit Das, Khoj International Artists' Association)

7. See "The Consequences," SAVE, at www.save-vultures.org/vulture-declines/the-consequences/, as of June 9, 2018.

8. Numerous scientific papers on the decline of the vultures in India are listed in "Scientific Papers and Project Reports," SAVE, at www.save-vultures.org/resources/scientific-papers/, as of September 29, 2016. See in particular the links to M. Gilbert et al., 2002, 2004, 2006; V. Prakash et al., 2003, 2005, 2007; Dr. Richard Cuthbert et al., 2006.

9. See "Vulture Declines," SAVE, at www.save-vultures.org/vulture-declines/, as of June 9, 2018.

10. See D. N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New York: Verso, 2002), 18.

11. In the modern era, the cow became a tool for mass political mobilization, with the first cow-protection movements beginning in the Punjab around 1870. Cow slaughter provoked communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in the mid-1960s, two decades after independence, all communal political parties joined to push for a national ban on cow slaughter. Jha, 18–20.

inside the National Museum of Natural History.¹⁵ Beneath a misspelled sign reading "ventures," in musty old glass cases, Delhi's last Oriental white-backed vultures are highlighted by Agarwal as they pick the flesh from a broken deer amid a desert diorama.

During the 1990s *détournement* had, in some respects, become a subgenre within modernist practice. Artists such as Fred Wilson used the technique of museum intervention to effectively explode the ideological suppositions inherent in the constructed fabric of institutional selection, exhibition, and arrangement. For example, in his 1992 piece *Mining the Museum*, in which he reinstalled the permanent collection of the Maryland Historical Society, Wilson chose to place a whipping post that had been used to punish slaves and criminals in front of a small group of elegant Victorian easy chairs that had been carefully positioned as if to facilitate viewing of the proceedings. In another part of the same reinstallation, Wilson put slave shackles side by side with an arrangement of Baltimore repoussé-style silver vessels. His intervention in the museum collection not only exposed the existing ideological biases that had previously kept such objects apart, his targeted juxtapositions also revealed the presence of entirely different historical narratives that were based on race and class.¹⁶

To facilitate his own institutional intervention, Agarwal arranged a series of objects, images, texts, and media to disrupt the displays found in the museum. He positioned a light box at waist height and perpendicular to a newly constructed wall. Its matte, half-reflecting, dark surface softly mirrored a bright glow, as well as any viewers who stopped to examine its contents. The light box illuminated two



12. "Consequences," SAVE.

13. By 2005, the feral dog population had increased from 17–18 million in the 1980s to nearly 30 million. India has the highest incidence of rabies in the world at twenty thousand cases annually, with 96 percent from dog bites. The presence of rotting animal carcasses has led to increases in animal and human diseases including anthrax, brucellosis, and tuberculosis. "Consequences," SAVE.

14. "Détournement is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority . . . *Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology." Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (1967; Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), Thesis 208, at www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/8.htm, as of September 30, 2016. *Détournement*, a play-tactic theorized by the Situationist Debord, means to disrupt the experience of the city, spectacle, and everyday life, and it also suggests "the creative pillaging (kidnapping) of pre-existing elements." Libero Andreotti, "Play-Tactics of the Internationale Situationniste," *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 43.

15. Agarwal, "Artist's Talk," (11:57–13:14).
16. For a discussion of Wilson's work from the perspective of laughter, see Rachel Smith, "Beyond Epistemic Disobedience: The Importance of Humor in Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*" (MA diss., University of British Columbia, 2014).

images, the contents of which helped create the illusion of a display table. On one side, Agarwal placed an image showing a pair of binoculars, a color drawing of an Oriental white-backed vulture, and decades-old entries (1977) from his diary that described his personal observations of the birds. On the other side, he set out an image with an optical magnifier, an old wooden case half full of Kodachrome slides, and photographic prints of nesting vultures. Both the container and the white-framed slides spoke to the presence of a predigital personal catalogue that, by today's standards, appears a generation out of date. On the wall above this display, in glowing letters, the title of the work, *Extinct?*, was presented in Hindi and in English. An illuminated text next to the light box recounted a short narrative that contrasted the modern fate of the vultures with the reverence shown to them by such cultures as the ancient Egyptian and contemporary Native American. Beside this, in front of an exhibition display that evoked ecology and the chain of life, Agarwal placed a video installation with footage of living vultures in the wild that he had taken over a six-month period in Rajasthan.

On one level, the elements deployed in Agarwal's museum intervention—the hand-colored drawing, autobiographical text, binoculars, printed photographs, slides, illuminated text, and video—delineate a technological shift over time in the modern powers of representation. In this respect, the museum's worn-out diorama display of stuffed birds, which Agarwal and many of his generation had visited, is decidedly a part of this modern representational timeline. The progression serves to underscore Agarwal's self-consciousness with respect to the shifting nature of the image itself. Closely drawing on the recurring figure of the vulture, it denotes a

historic transformation in the condition, experience, objectivity, and organization of human perception as it has passed through the life of the artist himself.¹⁷ In fact, the structure of Agarwal's work consists of two parallel thematic tracks running in seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, the arrangement evokes the increasing power of representation, and an underlying expansion in the world's productive capacity, which Walter Benjamin characterized as the ability to bring objects closer.¹⁸ On the other hand, it delineates the progressive stage-by-stage disappearance of the living subject that lies at the center of his attention. In the cross-over and conflation of these two tracks, Agarwal problematizes notions of both modernity and progress, as further underscored by his title, *Extinct?*

Taxidermy

An additional reading of Agarwal's work arises from a specific scrutiny of the taxidermy Oriental white-backed vultures at the center of his museum intervention. Taxidermy itself is a mimetic art form predicated on the process of stripping the organs, fluids, and tissues from the carcass of a freshly killed creature. While the actual mechanics of the process can obviously vary considerably from large mammals to small birds, and from amphibians to fish and reptiles, in most cases only the exterior of the creature, including its fur, feathers, skin, or scales, is retained.¹⁹ The pieces of the outer covering are then sewn, glued, or wired together into a three-dimensional figure that is often mounted on a mannequin-like frame, and then posed dramatically to achieve a quality of "aliveness."²⁰ The goal is not simply one of preservation, but the realization of a nuanced kines-thesis, uniting body and movement in space, that reproduces the attitudes and expressions of the creature as it appeared while living.²¹ By definition, taxidermy is a form of representation balanced directly and precisely on top of the substance of life itself. A living creature is gutted to create an object that in turn is reconfigured to evoke a precise semblance of the very animal it literally used to embody. As such, a taxidermied vulture is not just a sign or semiotic referent to a vulture, it is also simultaneously the actual remains of that vulture (or lion or tiger) minus its internal flesh. In fact, that animal carries forward the absence of flesh within its new, dead object-nature, and part of the artistry behind its reconstruction and illusionistic display is the attempt it makes to disavow and veil that central truth. Thus, in the context of Agarwal's vulture piece, taxidermy's inherent, simultaneous proximity to both corporeal life and that life's physical negation stands as a trope for the concept of extinction itself.

The taxidermist deploys skills that include sketching and drafting, the close observation of anatomy, copying from nature, and modeling in order to achieve the finest results.²² My point is that taxidermy not only straddles the seam between artistic representation and corporeal substance, but that as an artistic form, it also implicates mimesis in the actual process of life's extinguishment.²³ The importance of this concept for Agarwal is given one more twist by the dramaturgical arrangement of birds within the glass display case, around which he has placed the conceptual frame of his act of *détournement*. As I've described, the scavengers, situated purposefully in front of a desert diorama, are depicted ripping apart the remains of a deer. In fact, one of the birds is actually tilting its beak into the tissue of the bloodied, broken carcass. I would argue the visual display

17. "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history." Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 104, italics in original.

18. *Ibid.*, 105.

19. For an extensive and detailed breakdown of taxidermy techniques across the animal kingdom, see Oliver Davie, *Methods in the Art of Taxidermy* (London: H. T. Booth, 1894).

20. Merle M. Patchett, *Animal as Object: Taxidermy and the Charting of Afterlives* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2006), 11.

21. See Merle M. Patchett, "Putting Animals on Display: Geographies of Taxidermy Practice" (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2010), 117; and Jane C. Desmond, *Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 61; and Davie, ii.

22. One of the learned taxidermist skills cited by Montagu Browne is "an artist's perception of beauty of line and form." Browne, *Practical Taxidermy: A Manual of Instruction to the Amateur in Collecting, Preserving, and Setting Up Natural History Specimens of All Kinds*, 2nd ed., (London: L. Upcott Gill, 1884), 151. See also Patchett, "Putting Animals on Display," 117.

23. Patchett discusses the nature of this "irony" related to taxidermy with respect to the 1926 construction of the African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In order to re-create and preserve what was labeled as "the last vanishing wilds of Africa" within a large display, the deaths of several hundred animals from the wild were required, including a number of gorillas who were understood to be nearing extinction. Patchett, "Putting Animals on Display," 128.

of these vultures, which shows them to be consuming flesh, presents us with a grotesque double negative. Here, those who have been gutted of their own flesh (through taxidermy) are paradoxically depicted greedily eating the very living material that they themselves no longer possess. Finally, it should be noted that within the realm of popular representation there have been artists who have shown a keen awareness, if not fascination, with taxidermy's zero-degree proximity to life and death. In the 1960 film *Psycho*, for example, Alfred Hitchcock gives the character Norman Bates taxidermy as a hobby, repeatedly showing his deranged killer with stuffed birds.

Putting to one side for a moment the problematization of modernity, progress, and mimesis itself, the crux of Agarwal's *détournement* museum intervention strategy rests on the deliberate attempt it makes to bring three different eras of India's history into conflict—colonialism, nationalism, and the most recent period characterized by globalization. In this respect, we once again find that taxidermy plays a pivotal role. In fact, India's colonial past enters the artist's piece through the guise of the art and science of taxidermy, which played several key functions within Britain's colonial domination of India.

Colonialism and India's Ecosystem

Colonialism needs to be understood as embodying an ecological dimension. That is to say, broadly speaking, colonialist practice must be imagined not just as a condition of the domination of one people by another, but in some cases as the wholesale exploitation, alteration, and destruction of ecosystems.²⁴ British colonial policy in India represented just such a system, one that set out deliberately both to exploit and to alter the region's environmental landscape. While large hunts were common as a practice among the privileged rajas and royalty, with the new phase of colonialism that began following the defeat of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, this system of environmental regulation and exploitation intensified.²⁵ Between the 1850s and the 1920s, British colonial policy encouraged the widespread trophy and bounty hunting of large carnivores such as tigers, leopards, lions, bears, and elephants.²⁶ Big-game hunting was carried out by archetypal figures such as General Douglas Hamilton, who was reputed to "have legitimately shot more game on these hills than any other sportsman."²⁷ This was a part of a program of extermination aimed at opening up large swatches of land to agriculture.²⁸ The 1878 Forest Act had expanded the colonial government's regulatory control beyond timber products to that of animals as well.²⁹ From 1875 to 1925, rewards were paid for the killing or capture of eighty thousand tigers, one hundred fifty thousand leopards, and two hundred thousand wolves.³⁰ Local support for these extermination programs varied depending on the species and the region. Records passed down through oral history confirm that the colonial forest stipulations were understood by locals in some villages to be destroying the organic link they had with the surrounding environment. Access to formerly public forests for fuel, food, and medicines was now regulated, a condition that led to any violation of the colonial edict being seen and prosecuted as a crime. To the extent that they could, peasants resisted and protested against these forest regulations.³¹

24. Alfred Crosby argues that the main reason behind the Europeans' success in conquering the New World was not their superior weapons, but their *pomanteau biota* which traveled with them and devastated the indigenous cultures and their ecosystems. "It was their germs, not these imperialists themselves . . ." Crosby, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 196. See also Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14–15.

25. The Indian rebellion of 1857, also known as India's First War of Independence, lasted May 10, 1857–June 20, 1858, ending with the rebel defeat at Gwalior.

26. See Krithi K. Karanth, "Mammal Diversity, Persistence, and Conservation in India" (PhD thesis, Duke University, 2008), 4–5.

27. General Douglas Hamilton, *Records of Sport in Southern India* (London: R. H. Porter, 1892), xxxviii. The passage continues, "The regret at his departure is universal . . . and a sight of the trophies that adorn the walls of his house, of the sketches and incidents of the chase, and the relation thereof was a rich treat, and one never again to be experienced."

28. Karanth, 4.

29. See Swati Shresth, "Sahibs and Shikar: Colonial Hunting and Wildlife in British India, 1800–1935" (PhD thesis, Duke University, 2009), 17.

30. Karanth, 4–5.

31. See Atluri Murali, "Whose Trees? Forest Practices and Local Communities in Andhra, 1600–1922," in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism*, 104 and 119. The struggle to protect the forests continues to this day. Arundhati Roy caustically notes that the forest rebels who resisted the ecological and social reengineering of Central India to create "a good investment climate" for the "gush-up" economy have now been relabeled "Maoist terrorists." Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 10–15. For an extensive account of the struggle of the Bhilala adivasi, or indigenous peoples, to prevent their displacement by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, see Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).



Hunter posing in front of his tent with Indian servants and gun, India, ca. 1880s
(photograph in the public domain, provided by Piyaal Kundu, Old India Photos)



The skinning of a tiger, India, ca. 1880s
(photograph in the public domain, provided by Piyaal Kundu, Old India Photos)

Rhetoric of the Hunt

British big-game hunting in India played more than just the utilitarian functions of ridding the countryside of hundreds of thousands of wild animals and altering the shape of its environment. It also served a performative function as a display of power over the colony and its native peoples, and as a demonstration of the violence that was ritualistically encased within the broad doctrine of paternalism. On the one hand, the white hunters portrayed themselves as protecting the locals from dangerous predators. It was at this moment that the myth of the tiger as a man-eater developed, along with the assertion that the local Indian population was impotent against its attacks.³² Complete with the portrayal of the British as the brave slayers of dangerous beasts, these motifs later migrated into fiction, surfacing in such texts as *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling, 1894), and *Tiger Slayer by Order* (C. E. Gouldsbury, 1915).³³ On the other hand, hunting was enacted within the code of fair play or *shikar*, which in its connotations of sportsmanship and etiquette helped to separate the culture of the colonial hunters from that of the natives through the creation of a form of moral code of difference.³⁴ It is important to note the role of the *shikar*, or native guide, who was often present during the hunt as a tracker. Crucially, the *shikar*, who often actually carried the guns for the imperial sportsman, was denied the right of the kill, which was reserved for the colonial hunter alone.³⁵

Photography and taxidermy allowed for the ritual and rhetoric of the hunt to pass into the realm of images and objects. In this sense, a photograph showing a company of white hunters surrounding a tiger kill did not so much document the nature of the animal's demise, as (re)construct the meaning of its death as an emblem of colonial domination.³⁶ Similarly, taxidermy presented the remains of the actual wild animal—a leopard, a lion, a tiger—as simultaneously threatening and yet tamed. It demonstrated a mastery over nature and life that also acted as a trope for political control. Taxidermy trophies hung in official colonial buildings throughout India, consistently reaffirming British rule of the subcontinent. While no exact count of the number of animals that were preserved in this manner is possible, the scale of such a project can be glimpsed at through the records of one of the most successful Indian taxidermist businesses—the Van Ingen & Van Ingen Company, located in the city of Mysore, in South India. Founded in the 1890s, in its heyday it produced between four hundred and six hundred tiger mounts a year. Employing a mold and papier-mâché technique of taxidermy that allowed the final product to be lighter, and therefore easy to transport, between 1913 and 1947 the Van Ingens produced over twenty thousand different pieces of work, as records show.³⁷ Along with tigers, the animals included panthers, bears, antelope, and cheetahs, as well as smaller numbers of bison, pigs, fox, and the occasional rhinoceros. With many other companies in India involved in taxidermy over the course of a century, the overall number of animals preserved in this manner was no doubt considerably higher.³⁸

Knowledge and Power

Taxidermy was also considered a science and part of a knowledge base that characterized the imperial imagination. Taxidermists held special positions of respect

32. Patchett, "Putting Animals on Display," 246.

33. *Ibid.*, 246–47.

34. "Shikar meant good sporting behaviour, an ethical spirit shared among British and Indians alike." P. A. Morris, *Van Ingen & Van Ingen: Artists in Taxidermy* (London: MPM Publishing, 2006), 11. See also Shresth, 70.

35. Shresth, 121–22.

36. *Ibid.*, 136. See also James Ryan, *Picturing the Empire: Photography and Visualization of the British Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

37. Morris, 32 and 16. From 1947 to the end of the century the company produced another twenty thousand pieces. *Ibid.*, 106.

38. *Ibid.*, 108. Closed in 1999 due to dwindling animal stock and lack of commercial viability, the former Van Ingen warehouse and factory lands in Mysore have now been turned into a shopping mall and a multiplex cinema. *Ibid.*, 150–52.

39. Appropriating Edward Said's methodological critique of colonialism in the Middle East and applying it to the Dutch East Indies, Syed Mud Khairudin Aljunied discusses the appointment of a natural scientist—Salomon Muller—who, when the Dutch ruled Southeast Asia in 1816, was hired by the Natural Sciences Commission as a taxidermist, yet who was also aware of the imperial need to control the local population. "His primary mission was to give 'scientific' ethnological and geographical descriptions of the areas that he had visited, and hajjis did not escape his imperial imagination." Aljunied, "Edward Said and Southeast Asian Islam: Western Representations of Meccan Pilgrims (Hajjis) in the Dutch East Indies, 1880–1900," *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 11, nos. 1–2 (2004): 164.

40. "Tracing the genealogy of the museum in India does not lead us back to any princely collection of the Native States, nor to private colonial collections of relics and curiosities. . . . The beginnings are to be found, instead, in the most prestigious organ of Western Orientalist scholarship, in Sir William Jones' Asiatic Society, founded in Calcutta in 1784. The proposals to form a museum within the Asiatic Society in 1814 were part of a broader attempt at the time to place the Society on a solid institutional footing." Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Museum in the Colony: Collecting, Conserving, Classifying," in *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, ed. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 48.

41. Thomas Horsfield, *A Catalogue of the Birds in the Museum of the Hon. East-India Company* (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1856–58), iii–v and 1–10.

42. See Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh, introduction to *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying*, 4. See also Guha-Thakurta, 47. On the Louvre, Carol Duncan writes, "The French revolutionary government, seizing an opportunity to dramatize the creation of the new republican state, nationalized the king's art collection and declared the Louvre a public institution. The Louvre, once the place of kings, was now reorganized as a museum for the people, to be open to everyone free of charge. It thus became a lucid symbol of the fall of the Old Regime and the rise of the new order." Duncan, *Civilizing Ritual: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 22.

43. See Guha-Thakurta, 48–49 and 50. See also O. P. Kejariwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past: 1784–1838* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 116.

44. By 1911 there were a total of thirty-nine museums across India. Gyan Prakash, "Staging Science," *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying*, 86–88.

45. Prakash, 87 and 85.

as a result of their skills and were an integral part of those sent by the European powers to explore and assess their respective colonies during the nineteenth century.³⁹ The East India Company, which had a large group of employees studying India's wilderness and environment, including botanists and naturalists, set up the colony's first museum in Calcutta.⁴⁰ In 1854, the Zoological Museum of the East-India Company published a 750-page catalogue of the nearly eleven hundred birds its naturalists had documented across the region. While the book contains many long descriptions of species within their habitat, there are no illustrations. However, cited in the introductory remarks is a list of drawings held by the museum, along with mention of the existence of numerous preserved specimens. Interestingly, the first ten birds cited in the East-India catalogue are all vultures.⁴¹

The colonial entity's power to effectively index nature gave birth to the self-fulfilling narrative of legitimizing its control and domination over the region. On this point, and in contrast to the creation of such European "knowledge-producing" institutions as the British Museum (1753) and the Musée Français at the Louvre (1792), which provided both triumphalist and revolutionary republican formulations for their respective viewers (citizens), the formulation of museums in India can be understood to have taken place within a very distinctive triangulation of historical pressures related directly to furthering the colonial project.⁴²

The collecting and assembling of botanical and zoological specimens emerged as a prime subject of interest in India's first colonial museums. Due to the ongoing deaths of captive animals, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the science of taxidermy had begun to play an increasingly key role for naturalists and zoologists within the context of the museum, in order to preserve specimens.⁴³ However, as these institutions became larger, more comprehensive, and ubiquitous, what became apparent in the staging of their displays was the reluctance of the colonizers to represent the Indian people to themselves.⁴⁴ To put it another way, in presenting the "natural riches" of India—mammals, birds, reptiles, plants, and insects—back to the people who lived in the country, there was an overarching concern on the part of the colonizers not to foster a sense of national identity in the Indian population.

This led to the deployment of systems of classification within the museum context that were grounded in scientific knowledge, thus presenting lions and tigers (among a variety of other animals) as zoological specimens and objects of science. The systems of arrangement and classification allowed the colonizers to decouple the display of India's flora and fauna from questions regarding broader political identities, while simultaneously foregrounding and highlighting the power of Western systems of thought. Thus, the taxidermy display of a lion, tiger, or vulture within the colonial museum simultaneously functioned as a sign of Western power.⁴⁵

1947—the New National State

Following the overthrow of British colonialism, after decades of political struggle, and the subsequent birth of the Indian state in 1947, the display and science of taxidermy was folded into a new national project. Reframed within the new national museum space and the paradigm of citizenship, and stripped of their

colonial subtext, the taxidermy animal objects were now envisioned as functioning in a pedagogical and utopian manner with respect to nature. As such, the museum space was reconfigured to valorize and objectify the Enlightenment ideals underpinning the new country.⁴⁶ The National Museum of Natural History, however, which opened in 1978, also came to function as a ritual space that was designed to make use of power in order to fashion and create cultural identity.⁴⁷ In this sense, the animals that had been preserved through the process of taxidermy were now being redeployed to engender not only a sense of place, belonging, and loyalty in the populace of India, but also the dream of a new national subject harmoniously in balance with nature.⁴⁸ Underlining the relationship between museums and the fostering of a national identity, Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* observes that “museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political.”⁴⁹

It should be noted that the vultures that became the readymade subjects of the Agarwal piece were unlikely to have been taken as hunting prizes. Notably, live animals held in museum spaces had, by the later nineteenth century, begun to be transferred to menageries, where it was believed they could receive better care. Nevertheless, museums retained a claim on their deaths, to acquire their skins for preservation and display.⁵⁰ That said, within the National Museum of Natural History are dozens of other specimens—panthers, tigers, lions—many which may have been trapped and shot by hunters within the colonial context. I would again argue that it is not just these (singular) animals themselves, but the entire form of representation of taxidermy within the Indian context that carries with it this history of colonial and ecological domination.

Globalization

Agarwal’s intervention in this museum space sets the histories of these previous eras into direct conflict with the reality of a third era, the most recent period in Indian history, characterized by globalization. In 1991, in response to a severe and “unprecedented” economic crisis that was exacerbated by a spike in oil prices following the first Gulf War, the new Indian government of Narasimha Rao embarked on the New Economic Plan (NEP).⁵¹ A host of economic “reforms” were introduced commensurate with neoliberalism; these included the opening of the country to international trade and investment, the reduction of state regulations (deregulation), and the privatization of numerous state-run industries.

Many of the reforms affected the country’s agricultural industry, on which 70 percent of the population of India depended. During this period, tremendous pressure was placed on this sector to open up to foreign corporations through the engendering of a myth that a “technology of prosperity” could be obtained through the adoption of a variety of seeds, pesticides, chemicals, and agricultural implements needed for a high-yield agricultural revolution. In fact, through the involvement of GATT and the World Bank, these changes amounted to the recolonization of Indian agriculture by foreign corporations.⁵² One of the horrific consequences of changes in Indian agriculture has been the phenomenon of farmer suicides. Since the mid-1990s, over two hundred fifty thousand farmers have killed themselves. Studies show that the increasing numbers of farmer suicides can be linked directly to the financial reforms carried out during this period,

46. Partha Chatterjee observes, “If Nationalism expresses itself in a frenzy of irrational passion, it does so because it seeks to represent itself in the image of the Enlightenment and fails to do so. For Enlightenment itself, to assert its sovereignty as the universal ideal, needs its Other; if it could ever actualize itself in the real world as the truly universal, it would in fact destroy itself.” Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed, 1986), 17, italics in original. See also Homi Bhabha’s analysis of Chatterjee’s quote as a postcolonial critique of the modern state, Bhabha, “Dissemination,” *The Locations of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 203.

47. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi initiated the idea of the National Museum in 1972 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of independence; it officially opened in June 1978. See “Rare Fossils Destroyed by Fire at Delhi National Museum of Natural History,” *Indiawest*, April 27, 2016, at www.indiawest.com/news/india/rare-fossils-destroyed-by-fire-at-delhi-national-museum-of/article_101553a2-0ca0-11e6-84c2-3350b5635fc4.html, as of June 12, 2018. Carol Duncan, rejecting the idea of museum spaces as “neutral shelters” for objects, and citing the concept of “liminal experience” as derived from the folklorist Arnold van Gennep and the anthropologist Victor Turner, argues that they are stage sets in which visitors enact a ritual performance. Duncan, 7–20.

48. The dream of evoking a new national subject within an Indian museum space was epitomized by the exhibition *Masterpieces of Indian Art* in 1948, just a year after independence, for which Nehru had thousands of never-seen-before precious objects and treasures representing five thousand years of Indian art installed in New Delhi’s newly vacant Viceroy’s Palace. Kavita Singh, “The Museum Is National,” in *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying*, 126–27.

49. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 178.

50. Guha-Thakurta, 50.

51. The foreign exchange reserve plummeted to just \$2.2 billion, inflation was close to 14 percent, the country’s fiscal deficit was rising to 8.4 percent of GDP, and the current account deficit was as high as \$9.9 billion. Baidyanath Prasad Singh, *Economic Liberalisation in India* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1995), xvii.

52. Singh, xxxi, 174, and 178.

which allowed the banking sector to decrease its lending to the relatively unprofitable agricultural sector.⁵³ This policy of financial “liberalization” resulted in the creation of a credit crunch, massive rural debt, and as a consequence, farmers’ increasingly disastrous dependence on unscrupulous moneylenders.

Diclofenac

At the very same time the government of India was embarking on these changes in agriculture, banking, and other sectors, it resisted attempts by the same globalizing forces to deregulate its pharmaceutical industry.⁵⁴ This led to the situation that specifically resulted in the decimation of Indian vulture populations. During the early 1990s a drug called Diclofenac, which sells under the brand name Voveran and was owned at the time by the Swiss corporate entity Ciba-Geigy, was marketed in India for the very low price of 5.67 rupees, a marked contrast to its unsubsidized cost in the United States, which would be the equivalent of 239.47 rupees.⁵⁵ In India, Diclofenac is a cheap painkiller given to domestic cattle.⁵⁶ As previously mentioned, the numbers of cattle in India are exceedingly high.⁵⁷ Within the country, the animal is used for milk and butter, and to pull carts and ploughs; its dung is used as a fuel substitute.⁵⁸ However, due to Hindu religious practices, when domestic cattle fall ill, they are neither killed nor consumed as food.⁵⁹ As a consequence, their carcasses are left for scavengers such as vultures to eat. The problem, unrecognized in the early 1990s, was that Diclofenac, which can persist within an animal’s body up to eight days, is toxic to vultures and causes their kidneys to fail. Since that time it has been scientifically proven that the vultures’ consumption of cattle carcasses contaminated with Diclofenac was the direct cause of the mass die-out of raptors in the country.⁶⁰ So, as pointed out earlier, from a population at the beginning of the 1990s of between 100 and 160 million, vultures had almost entirely vanished from the subcontinent by 2006.⁶¹

This is not to say that a clear correlation exists between the 1991 beginning of economic globalization in India under the NEP and the nearly simultaneous commencement of the decline of the vulture population. I believe it is important, however, to point to the pressures placed on the country’s large domestic agricultural sector by the reforms as a broad contributing factor. Further, I would argue that it is helpful to see this complex, multilayered event within Appadurai’s general theory of global cultural process as a moment of disjuncture between several different landscapes.⁶² From this perspective, the unprecedented collapse of the vulture population takes on an emblematic quality that speaks to a fissure between the policies of neoliberalism and the ecological systems that support life.

Perverse Awakening

Within the structure of Agarwal’s vulture piece, the artist sets into conflict the carnage of the country’s era of globalization, characterized by the Diclofenac die-off, with India’s earlier historical periods of nationalism and colonialism. The way he accomplishes this can be read as both sarcasm and a joke. The utopian element embodied in the previous generation’s natural history museum, that the new Indian national state would strike a “harmonious” union and balance with nature, is now found to have been disastrously wrong. Further still, it is taxidermy, an art

53. Between 1995 and 2005 the rate of suicide in Indian farmers increased 60 percent. Anoop Sadanandan, “Political Economy of Suicide: Financial Reforms, Credit Crunches and Farmer Suicides in India,” *Journal of Developing Areas* 48, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 289 and 303.

54. Before 1971, when India had a product patent system, its “drug prices were the highest in the world.” However, under the Indian Patent Act of 1970, Indian law was amended and now provides for “process patents” rather than “product patents.” This resulted in a significant reduction in the price of pharmaceuticals. Further, under this program, India has achieved near self-sufficiency in the production of bulk drugs, and has begun to export to other countries, including the United States. Singh, 221–23.

55. Ibid., 224. The exchange rate for the rupee in 1990 was around 18 to one US dollar.

56. See “NSAID Alert! Saving Asia’s Vultures from Extinction,” SAVE, at www.save-vultures.org/nsaid-alert/, as of June 10, 2018.

57. According to SAVE, there were 400 million head of cattle in the 1980s, with the number rising to 500 million in 2005. SAVE, “Vulture Declines.” Deryck O. Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places: Origins and Survival of Animal Homes in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 3, provides an older statistic that places the number of cattle in India at 180 million—or one third of all the animals found on the planet.

58. Lodrick, 4.

59. Jha, 18–20.

60. “Diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory and analgesic widely used on cattle, was identified in 2003 as the cause of a staggering 99 percent decline in the populations of three species of Indian vulture . . .” India’s environmental vulture crisis was cited in an official United States government report in the documents released by Wikileaks, “New Delhi Bi-weekly Esth report: Sept 2008 First Week,” Wikileaks, at https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o8NEWDELHI2418_a.html, as of March 1, 2016. See also “NSAID Alert! Saving Asia’s Vultures,” SAVE.

61. “Consequences,” SAVE.

62. See Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 7 (1990): 295–310.

63. The underlying tenet of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* is the notion of modernity as a "dream-world" in which the collective is historically asleep and thus cannot seize an understanding of history. Benjamin sought ways for the collective to escape from this dream state and to arrive at revolutionary consciousness or "awakening." A key aspect of his strategy lay in the seam between the divergent experiences of history connecting different generations. For Benjamin's theory with respect to "wish images," "historical awakening," and the "coming-to-consciousness of a generation," see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 110–58 and 253–86. See also the numerous citations on "awakening" and "dialectical reversal" in *The Arcades Project* itself, including K1, 1; K1, 2; "Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance," K1, 3; "The nineteenth century a spacetime (a dreamtime 'Zeitraum')." K1, 4; K1a, 2; and K1a, 3; Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 388–90.

64. "The fact that we were children during this time belongs together with its objective image. It had to be this way in order to produce this generation. That is to say: we seek a teleological moment in the context of dreams. Which is the moment of waiting. The dream waits secretly for the awakening; the sleeper surrenders himself to death only provisionally, waits for the second when he will cunningly wrest himself from its clutches. So, too, the dreaming collective, whose children provide the happy occasion for its own awakening." Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, K1a, 2, 390.

65. Mark Dion, "Miwon Kwon in Conversation with Mark Dion," *Mark Dion* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 16. Through the *Systema Naturae*, which was published in ten different editions from 1735 to 1758, the Enlightenment figure Carl Linnaeus provided a system for classifying all living things. Wilfrid Blunt and William Thomas Stearn, *Linnaeus: The Compleat Naturalist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.

66. Commander McBragg was a cartoon figure of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, parodying a blowhard retired British Imperial explorer. See numerous cartoons available on YouTube including, "The World of Commander McBragg—Intro 1," YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJ4DfzkF114&list=PLSH3YbxQYTmSISy6JwjH5O1OxeO97uEL4>, as of June 10, 2018. NB: While the cartoon character last name is spelled McBragg, with two Gs, the title character of Dion piece is McBrag with one G. Dion, 16.

67. For images and a brief discussion of the piece see Dion, 9–10. See also Lisa Graziose Corrin, "Mark Dion's Project: A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderful History of Nature," in *Mark Dion*, 44.

and science introduced during the colonial era, that has now ironically come in handy, since without the long-ago stuffing of the country's animals, the present generation living under globalization would effectively have been left without any vultures at all! In this sense, Agarwal's art piece mockingly prompts the questions: Which era was worse? Which era was more destructive to the country's environment? But more concretely, it is the "wish elements," as Benjamin would have characterized them, embedded in these previous forms from the past—the museum and the stuffed birds—that Agarwal perversely deploys as cross-generational moments of consciousness and historical awakening.⁶³ It is precisely the fact that the dream of a harmonious relationship with nature was not realized that allows Agarwal to return to these "ruins" to settle, so to speak, generational accounts. In this sense, the historical consciousness he squeezes from the figures emerges as a perverse completion of the original "wish" that is still buried within them, and hoping to be awakened.⁶⁴

Mark Dion

Some critical perspective on Agarwal's vulture piece is provided when one considers it in light of the work of another contemporary artist who has also attempted to address the world's ecological crisis. In a series of gallery installations produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the American artist Mark Dion sought to engage the subject of species loss and environmental destruction within his own modernist practice. In fact, taken in its entirety, one of the defining elements of Dion's work is the attempt it makes to problematize the historically constructed ideological frames of language and culture that mediate our relationship with nature. This concern was acutely illustrated in a 1989 piece entitled *Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata), or Commander McBrag Taxonomist*, in which Dion united the historic process of naming animals as they were both "discovered" (by Carl Linnaeus, 1707–1778) and passed into extinction.⁶⁵ Fantastically conceived around the 1960s–70s imperial cartoon explorer Commander McBragg, the installation consists of an early twentieth-century desk and bureau, complete with a potpourri of items including a dish of animal figurines, comparative species wall illustrations, and a butterfly net.⁶⁶ While Agarwal's *Extinct?* focuses on some readymade vultures found in the institutional space of a natural history museum, Dion constructed *Commander McBrag*, along with several other works in this series, as discrete gallery installations. Nevertheless, there are similarities in how Agarwal and Dion each approached the subject of extinction. For example, as with Agarwal's piece, a key conceptual element in Dion's work is his use of stuffed animal figures, including those made via taxidermy. *Commander McBrag* included within its broad configuration of objects a taxidermy deer head on a wall mount. More concretely, as the central focus of another 1989 gallery installation, Dion displayed the taxidermy head of an African black rhino half-buried in the wood chips of a shipping container.⁶⁷ Entitled *Extinction Series: Black Rhino with Head*, Dion stamped the exterior of the small group of crates surrounding the rhino with destination names such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, and South Korea, as well as a packing sign indicating that the contents were fragile. At one level, Dion's work sought to highlight the global smuggling of illegal animal parts that is contributing to the extinction of African



Mark Dion, with William Schefferine, *Selections from the Endangered Species List (the Vertebrata), or Commander McBrag Taxonomist, 1989*, desktop, typewriter, plaster dinosaur, index cards, books, potted cactus, candlestick, candle, ceramic bowl, plastic animal figurines, spoon, butterfly net, wooden collector's case, canvas bag, framed picture, drawings, pen, shell, cork, animal head, tape player, nautilus shell, glass vials, and dissection kit (artwork © Mark Dion; photograph provided by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York)

Mark Dion, *Extinction Series: Black Rhino with Head (detail), 1989*, wooden crates, stenciled lettering, color photographs, rhino head, wood chips, map of Africa, dimensions variable (artwork © Mark Dion; photograph provided by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York)



species. Like Agarwal's vulture piece, Dion's *Black Rhino* also uses taxidermy's inherent direct proximity to corporeal life, as well as to life's physical negation, as a trope for the concept of extinction itself.

The Library for the Birds of Antwerp

The connection between representation and corporeal life at the heart of Agarwal's work is explored in another of Dion's extinction pieces, one on the subject of birds. In a 1993 installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, Dion effectively turned a room within the gallery into an aviary. Entitled *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp*, the work consisted of a large denuded tree, located in the center of the space and onto which Dion had placed a junk-store-like assortment of objects. The items included birdcages, bird traps, nets, Audubon prints, slingshots, canisters of DDT, and cartridges of birdshot.⁶⁸ Of particular note was a series of books Dion set among the tree branches; they included Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, William Hornaday's *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. On the ceramic tile base that circled the tree trunk, which was thematically intended as an explicit allegory of both the tree of knowledge and the tree of life, Dion placed a series of seventeenth-century woodcut images of birds. The woodcuts specifically referenced Antwerp's history as a colonial trader in New World bird species.⁶⁹ With the objects, book titles, and bird images he selected and configured for the piece, Dion made numerous thematic references to ecological crisis and species extinction. Certainly, the DDT canisters and Carson's *Silent Spring* made explicit environmental reverences. In addition, a number of the woodcuts were of bird species that had historically been driven into extinction, such as the moa, great auk, and dodo.⁷⁰ Stepping beyond this successive layering of environmental

68. See Norman Bryson, "Mark Dion and the Birds of Antwerp," in *Mark Dion*, 91 and 95.

69. Dion also placed the same woodcuts in a second project, *The Project for the Antwerp Zoo*. Here the seventeenth-century images were set on tile below the modern animal cages. Dion thus attempted to juxtapose two different historic timelines through which birds were viewed. *Ibid.*, 90–97; 90.

70. *Ibid.*, 90.



Mark Dion, *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp*, 1993, 18 African finches, tree, ceramic tiles, books, photographs, bird cages, bird traps, chemical containers, rat and snake in liquid, shotgun shells, ax, nets, Audubon prints, and bird nest, installation view, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp (artwork © Mark Dion; photograph provided by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York)

signifiers, however, I would argue that the key conceptual element in this installation was Dion's inclusion of eighteen live African finches.⁷¹ The introduction of living birds into the gallery space completely offset the reading of extinction within the work. Viewers focused on a consideration of the signs and images related to ecological destruction and avian loss were simultaneously confronted with the phenomenological experience of actual creatures. Thus, in a way analogous to the deployment of taxidermy but in a completely different fashion, Dion constructed a direct, degree-zero relationship between representation and living substance by literally interfacing physical life with his objects and images. The artist's deployment of life in the form of living birds serves to animate not just the seventeenth-century woodcuts, but also the profound historical and environmental tragedy encased within the frame of their constructed vision.

In the conceptualization of this work, however, Dion takes an additional step to address the broad issues of species loss and environmental destruction.

71. Ibid., 96.

The *Library for the Birds of Antwerp* also posits a role for a utopian dimension in confronting the global environmental crisis. Dion offers his library placed in the branches as a tool through which to actually teach the birds themselves how to avoid extinction. Thus, quite literally, the artist is not above mobilizing a vision of his own constructed utopia as an important dimension of his ecological polemic.

Agarwal's Twin Display

Just as Dion tackles the subjects of ecological crisis and extinction, Agarwal's vulture piece similarly mobilizes its own visionary component. In contrast to Dion's utopian assertion, however, Agarwal constructs what I would describe as a countervision. As previously indicated, *Extinct?* consisted of two parts constructed in separate locations. The first was the *détournement* vulture display at the National Museum of Natural History, and the second was a large visual presentation at the nearby Mandi roundabout. In the dark of night, the white, curved, tightly drawn, abstracted, winglike figures suspended above the roundabout served as screens for projected images of vultures within their habitat. I would argue for a recognition, in the context of a modern city, of the contrast between the city's corporate logos and lighted advertising billboards and Agarwal's abstract illuminated shapes. Seen at night, the artist's glowing, winged forms disavow commercial signage, while simultaneously speaking to the existence of something that lies beyond its scope. This act of refusal and articulation is also evidenced when we consider the photo installation Agarwal also constructed on the Mandi roundabout. The display consisted of simple fixed curving backgrounds with photographs of vultures nesting in trees or gathered in a desert, without any accompanying symbols or text. The white woven wing shape was in fact a motif Agarwal used to unify the space of the roundabout with that of the museum. One assembly of the curved fabric, also used as a projection screen, was visible to those descending a worn-out stairway (Duchamp-like) of the National Museum. In a similar vein, and in the context of the subject of environmental degradation, Agarwal turned the roundabout, originally designed during the colonial period by Edwin Lutyens as a sign of élan and European modernist construction, into its opposite, an environmental vortex and a reminder of that which may have been lost forever.

48 Degrees Exhibition

While, by definition, all the artists participating in the Delhi exhibition sought to engage environmental themes, it should be noted that several pieces specifically aimed to highlight issues of consumption and urban development from the perspective of class. Among these works was Vivan Sundaram's *Floatage*, the raft constructed from thousands of plastic water bottles. Put together and launched into the Yamuna River during the exhibition, Sundaram's plastic-bottle boat was intended as a direct comment on the issues of consumption, waste, and the availability of clean water.⁷² However, the work also takes on a dimension of class mockery when one considers that Sundaram shaped the craft to resemble a large luxury swimming pool.⁷³

In another piece in the *48 Degrees* exhibition, Ashok Sukumaran and Shaina Anand's *Motornama Roshanara*, hour-long guided rickshaw bike tours were provided in

72. See "48 Degrees Celsius," Curating Cities: A Database of Eco Public Art, at <http://eco-public-art.org/48-degrees-celsius/>, as of June 11, 2018.
73. See "Report from 48C Festival in Delhi, India," *Center for Sustainable Practices in the Arts*, February 21, 2009, at www.sustainablepractice.org/2009/02/21/report-from-48c-festival-in-delhi-india/, as of June 11, 2018. See also the 2009 video of a later iteration, Vivan Sundaram, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7brqdUMKFU, as of June 11, 2018.



Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, three suspended curved abstract fabric “wing” screens, projected light and visual images, installation view, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology*, Mandi House roundabout, New Delhi (artwork © Ravi Agarwal; photograph provided by the artist)

74. “Motornama Roshanara,” at <http://studio.camp/event.php?this=motornama>, as of June 11, 2018.

75. For video recordings of selected tours, see “Motornama: Tours 01–10,” 2008, at <http://pad.ma/WB/info>, as of June 11, 2018.

76. “48 Degrees Celsius,” *Curating Cities*.

77. See Christiane Brosius, “Emplacing and Excavating the City: Art, Ecology, and Public Space,” *TransCultural Studies* 2015, no. 1 (2015): 75–125, at <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/16507/16493>, as of June 11, 2018.

the immediate vicinity of Roshanara Road, a neighborhood that used to sit at the center of Delhi’s industrial production. In fact, located in the north of Delhi, Roshanara Road was at one time considered to be the site of Asia’s largest engine repair market. However, court-initiated “anti-pollution” drives in 1996 and 2000 had a devastating economic impact on the area, forcing out many industries.⁷⁴ The rickshaw tours were specifically designed to confront participants with both the area’s unseen history and the problems experienced by local workers with regard to the industrial changes, including issues of employment, transportation, and housing.⁷⁵

In another work from the exhibition, a large, dead tree hung from an industrial crane high above Barakhamba Road, an area undergoing massive redevelopment.⁷⁶ For his piece, the artist, Krishnaraj Chonat, chose a site with an old, broken-down, colonial-style bungalow, itself home to some of the last living trees in the neighborhood. Entitled *Crane + Tree*, Chonat’s work was generally understood to be a direct comment on the fate of the nearly two hundred thousand trees that had been eradicated from this part of Delhi during the recent round of urban development.⁷⁷ I would argue, however, that Chonat’s piece carries another



Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, large-scale photographic installation, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology*, Mandi House roundabout, New Delhi (artwork © Ravi Agarwal; photograph provided by the artist)

78. See Kathryn Myers, "Keeping It Clean: Indian Artist Krishnaraj Chonat on Changing Histories—Video Interview," *Art Radar: Contemporary Art Trends and News from Asia and Beyond*, September, 6, 2013, at <http://artadarjournal.com/2013/09/06/keeping-it-clean-indian-artist-krishnaraj-chonat-on-changing-histories-video-interview/>, as of June 11, 2018.

79. "Report from 48C Festival in Delhi, India," *Ecoartspace Blog*, December 28, 2008, at http://ecoartspace.blogspot.ca/2008_12_01_archive.html, as of June 12, 2018.

level of meaning related to the massive human upheaval and resettlement that also accompanied the development plan. The hanging, uprooted tree, brightly lit during the evenings by crosscutting floodlights, had the intense drama and staging of an execution.⁷⁸ The artist's spectacular depiction of the industrially implicated death speaks not only to the hundreds of thousands of trees that had been destroyed, but also to the faceless millions of people who, through the remaking of the city, had been literally bulldozed from habitation in the area.

Indeed, Navjot Altaf's two-channel video project *Barakhamba*, also part of *48 Degrees Celsius* and located just in front of Chonat's suspended tree, attempted, in a very direct way, to put a human face on the massive urban displacement taking place in this part of Delhi. In a self-conscious fashion, Altaf's work sought to break down the distance between those whose lives had been affected by development and those who were listening to these accounts, by intercutting community testimonials with live shots of viewers watching the work. Thus, spectators would see, in a continuous loop on multiple screens, not only the faces of those whose lives on Barakhamba Road had been forever altered, but





Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, suspended curved abstract fabric “wing” screens across stairway, installation view, *48 Degrees Celsius Public. Art.Ecology*, National Museum of Natural History, New Delhi (artwork © Ravi Agarwal; photograph provided Suzanne Lee, Khoj International Artists’ Association)

Navjot Altaf, screens from *Barakhamba*, 2008, looping two-channel projection of video interviews intercut with live camera of spectators, 80 min., *48 Degrees Celsius Public. Art.Ecology*, 20 Barakhamba Road, New Delhi (artwork © Navjot Altaf; photographs provided by the artist)

80. See Amita Baviskar, “The Politics of the City,” August 2002, at www.india-seminar.com/2002/516/516%20amita%20baviskar.htm, as of June 11, 2018; and “Custodial Death and Police Firing: A Tale of Two Cities,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, (1995): 862–65. The post-mortem report showed a large number of external injuries caused by blows to the body. “A case of causing death due to *rash and negligent action* (emphasis added) under Section 304(a). IPC” was lodged against the constable involved in the killing of Dilip. “Custodial Death,” 862–65.

also themselves, their own physical images, placed in the context of these accounts and stories.⁷⁹

At this point it is necessary to step back and examine Agarwal’s *Extinct?* and the 2008 Delhi group show in which it was exhibited within the larger frame of reference of environmental politics in contemporary India. This demand arises as a result of both Agarwal’s own declarations regarding the role he believes Indian artist-activists like himself must play, and the social conflicts linked to environmental issues within the capital of New Delhi. The examination of one particular event that took place in the city over a decade before the show is instructive in informing both the issue and the problem.

Ashok Vihar

Early on the morning of January 30, 1995, a poorly clad youth suspected of having defecated in a neighborhood park in the well-to-do colony of Ashok Vihar in northwest Delhi was caught by a local resident. A group of incensed homeowners and two police constables promptly surrounded the young man, and within a few minutes he had been beaten to death.⁸⁰ The eighteen-year-old victim, named Dilip had been a visitor to Delhi, staying at his uncle’s place in a ten thousand-household *jhuggi* (slum) that runs along the railway tracks opposite Ashok Vihar.



Krishnaraj Chonat, *Crane + Tree*, 2008, uprooted dead tree suspended from industrial crane and illuminated by floodlights, installation view, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art. Ecology*, Barakhamba Road, New Delhi (artwork © Krishnaraj Chonat; photograph provided by the artist)

81. Baviskar.

82. "Custodial Death," 86z.

His uncle was a laborer in an industrial zone known as Wazirpur that did not provide any worker housing, and the *jhuggi* cluster had only one toilet for every two thousand people.⁸¹ Dilip had come from Allahabad to the capital to watch the Republican Day parades. When the police who had killed him attempted to remove his body, angry residents from the *jhuggi* began pelting them with stones. In response, the police opened fire on the crowd, killing three and injuring seventeen; a fourth person died three days later. One hundred twenty-three people were arrested.⁸² Dilip's death at the hands of upper-middle-class home owners and the police, and the subsequent riot, brought to a head the long-standing battle between well-off Delhi residents who wanted a (private) natural space with trees and grass devoted to leisure and recreation, and the much more basic needs

of disadvantaged (walled-off) citizens for access to toilets, sanitation, and urban passage. In a very brutal manner, it also highlighted what has been labeled as India's "bourgeois environmental movement."⁸³

Bourgeois Environmentalism

As a social phenomenon, bourgeois environmentalism reflects the desire of the Indian upper middle class to remake the country in its own vision at the expense of the poor, using environmental "motherhood" rhetoric that includes concepts such as "green space," "cleaner living environments" and "nature preserves for recreational enjoyment."⁸⁴ In this sense, it is environmentalism as a form of class war. Two separate Delhi court rulings from the early 2000s help illustrate the massive front on which the reconfiguration is being carried out. In one instance, two million people lost their jobs when the Supreme Court of India ordered the closure of all polluting and nonconforming industries within the city.⁸⁵ In a separate order by the Delhi High Court, another three million people were displaced when the court ordered their *jhuggi* squatter settlement homes torn down and removed. In the case of the now-demolished Nangla Machi "slum colony," which was a part of the original court order, the eviction took four years, but by 2006 its residents had mostly been "resettled" forty kilometers away on Delhi's northern borders.⁸⁶ Both rulings were set in motion by environmentalists and consumer rights groups, and Delhi's disorganized working class was powerless to stop it. As Amita Baviskar points out in her article "The Politics of the City," "concerns around aesthetics, leisure, safety and health have come to significantly shape the disposition of urban space." The failure to organize the poor around issues of housing and placement within the city has meant that the bourgeois vision of Delhi has advanced virtually unopposed.⁸⁷ Delhi's 2010 Commonwealth Games were organized and planned under the city slogan of "Clean Delhi—Green Delhi." Slums were cleared while the unauthorized Commonwealth Games Village shopping and service center went ahead.⁸⁸

In one example of how bourgeois environmentalism distorted the approach to larger environmental policy concerns, a 1996 legislative push in New Delhi to move away from nonbiodegradable plastic materials metamorphosed, after several years of negotiations, into a much narrower legal action banning thin-gauge polythene bags as overt and identifiable (aesthetic) signs of litter within the community.⁸⁹ In other words, an attempt to address the broad concept of reducing the introduction of plastic as a material into the environment was, incredibly, redirected into an attack on Delhi's small-scale recycling industry by its focus on plastic bags. In practice, the law would have decimated the livelihoods of these workers and businesses, had its effects not been watered down through an intense lobbying effort by the "urban poor."⁹⁰ The irony regarding bourgeois environmentalism is that while the poorer classes survive at a subsistence level and their environmental "footprint" is relatively small, it is in fact the consumption levels of the upper classes that are environmentally unsustainable.⁹¹ Consumerism, however, has been sanctified because the buying power of India's middle and upper classes provides an index of the country's "progress."⁹²

In the Indian countryside, bourgeois environmentalism plays out in a different manner with respect to the country's tiger reserves. India's indigenous

83. Baviskar.

84. Samantha Wishnak, "Slums, the Environment, and the 'Public Interest': Right or Recreation?" (paper presented at Pozen Family Center For Human Rights, University of Chicago, available upon request, 2010), 4.

85. The court actually took the implementation of its own order out of the hands of the local Delhi government through the creation of an independent nodal agency under the control of the central government. See Kaveri Gill, "'Bourgeois Environmentalism,' the State, the Judiciary, the 'Urban Poor': The Political Mobilization of a Scheduled Caste Market," *Of Poverty and Plastic* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209. See also Baviskar.

86. Sanjay Srivastava, "Urban Spaces, Disney-divinity and the Moral Middle Classes in Delhi," in *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (London: Routledge, 2011) 370.

87. Baviskar. See also Gautam Bhan, "'This is no longer the city I once knew': Evictions, the Urban Poor and the Right to the City in Millennial Delhi," *Environment and Urbanization* 21, no. 1 (2009): 127–42. "The court judgments against the poor are stark markers that the welfare, nationalist, and development state that stressed cohesion and the inclusion of the poor in the national economic mission is no longer the dominant ethical model of contemporary India." *Ibid.*, 137.

88. Wishnak, 13. See also Kalyani Menon-Sen, "Delhi and CWG2010: The Games behind the Games," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 3 (August 2010): 677–81.

89. Ravi Agarwal's organization Toxics Link, which had been one of the NGOs advocating for a policy dealing with plastics, pointedly criticized the final bill, Gill, 199.

90. The bill was labeled, "The Delhi Plastic Bag (Manufacture, Sale, and Usage) and Non-Biodegradable Garbage (Control) Bill," *Ibid.*, 199–208.

91. Baviskar.

92. Emma Mawdsley, "India's Middle Classes and the Environment," *Development and Change* 35, no. 1 (2014): 86.

peoples have tried to use the country's 2006 Forest Rights Act to recuperate thousands of tracts of land that had previously belonged to them. However, they have been blocked by environmental groups in areas such as the Panna Tiger Reserve. This is despite the fact the reserve no longer has any tigers. The Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan is in a very similar situation. Entire villages continue to be cleared from within the boundaries of the park, however, to make way for a wilderness playground for rich tourists.⁹³ In many respects, bourgeois environmentalism needs to be envisioned not as an Indian but as a global phenomenon, in which the Western world tramples on the world's 900 million rural poor, who live more directly within the natural environment.⁹⁴ My point here is that environmental movements do not necessarily lead toward social justice, and that in the Indian case, at least, any assumptions that ecology and equity are always intertwined are false.⁹⁵

Agarwal's Activism and Art

Agarwal, an environmental activist, is the founding director of Toxics Link, a non-governmental organization dedicated to raising awareness related to issues of toxicity in the public domain.⁹⁶ He began his art career as a photographer who documented people working in the street. Following his first show, the 1994 *Street View*, Agarwal began a four-year collaboration with Jan Breman, a South Asian studies specialist on rural and urban labor and employment.⁹⁷ Their work resulted in the book *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, for which Agarwal provided over five hundred images of migrant Indian labor that included photographs of ragpickers, plumbers, peddlers, painters, prostitutes, and many others who service the Indian elites.⁹⁸ As Agarwal explains, it was his photographic work that led him into environmental activism, and the two activities play equal roles in his life.⁹⁹ Specifically, though, it was during a struggle (eventually successful) to save a forest from destruction that he found himself confronted by the reality of the poor for whom that forest was home. As Agarwal relates, after he befriended these people, they soon became both a subject of his photographic work and his efforts to save and protect them from displacement. Ironically, this was after he himself had caused the loss of the right to the land on which they lived through his own activism.¹⁰⁰ During an artist's talk at the 2011 Delhi PhotoFestival, Agarwal was directly confronted about his relationship to his subjects, the ethics of both his photographic and environmental work, and accusations that he was nothing more than a "gallery artist."¹⁰¹ While rejecting the notion of the gallery setting as pejorative and limiting to artistic expression, Agarwal also affirmed that environmental activism must include a social dimension.¹⁰²

That said, the meaning of an artwork is not something decided by the artist. Clearly, bourgeois environmentalism is a historical phenomenon that characterizes elements of India's environmental movement. In a real sense, it is in the process of reshaping the city of Delhi at the expense of the poor, particularly with respect to the issue of land speculation. Thus, the phenomenon of bourgeois environmentalism is bound up in a conflicted way with the meaning of the 48 *Degrees* exhibition, and it is an element that contributes to any reading of Agarwal's piece, as well as those of Sundaram, Chonat, and the show's other contributors.

93. See Michael Connellan, "The Human Cost of India's Tiger Conservation Policy" *Guardian*, September 7, 2009, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cif-green/2009/sep/07/india-wildlife-conservation>, as of June 11, 2018.

94. Ibid. For an analysis of the broader struggle by Bhilala adivasis in Western India, who are fighting against displacement by the Sardar Sarovar Dam, see Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

95. Baviskar.

96. "About Us, Team," Toxics Link, at www.toxics-link.org/?q=team, as of June 11, 2018.

97. Agarwal "Artist Talk," 1:15–6:15.

98. Jan Breman, Arvind N. Das, *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14.

99. Agarwal, "Artist Talk," 2:46.

100. Agarwal "Artist Talk," 6:17–8:06 and 20:20–21:16.

101. Agarwal "Artist Talk," 18:20–20:14 and 22:18–25:00.

102. "It is very important to them that people like me support them [a community displaced from the forest by environmental laws]. Because we were pushing for these laws and then we said [to the Court] these laws are fine but you cannot displace a community . . . it became a voice in their favor. Because it wasn't an opposition voice, it was a call from the people [Agarwal himself] who . . . had pushed for the laws," Agarwal "Artist Talk," 20:24–20:42.



Ravi Agarwal, photographs from *Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism, 1997–2000* (photographs © Ravi Agarwal, provided by the artist).

Clockwise from top left:

Migrant workers, including children, set up a temporary makeshift camp; some are employed in the construction industry to build offices and homes.

Little girl as member of brick-making gang; women attempt to carry as many bricks as possible, as payment is per piece.

Stone breaker in quarry

Seasonal laborers preparing thread for the kite-flying festival

As with these other 48 *Degrees* works, I would argue that within Agarwal's image of the vulture as a multifaceted signifier, there also exists an element that seeks to critically address this phenomenon. At one level, as scavenger bird, a creature known at times to pick through garbage, the vulture can be read as a cipher that invokes Delhi's working poor. At another level, and as previously mentioned, the vulture is also a bird that has been venerated across other times and cultures. It is important to point out that in invoking these cross-cultural references, Agarwal also notes ironically that it has only been within India's most recent history that this iconic bird has failed to survive. In fact, Agarwal demonstrates his concern by approaching his subject not simply through the frame of other cultures and mythologies but, more important, through the lens of modern progress. As previously mentioned, the other images Agarwal carefully set within and around his museum display—the drawing, photographs, and video installation—also invoke the issue of progress as it materially passed through the artist's life. The world's increasing technological ability to generate imagery that has the capacity to "bring things closer" to the viewer was simultaneously cited as responsible for causing those living things to disappear. It is in light of the concept of progress that Agarwal, as artist and activist, wishes to construct his countervision of the vulture in the modern world.

Progress

In 2010 Rosalind Krauss published a short article on Marcel Broodthaers, an artist who, in a 1968 work, created an imaginary museum, *Musée d'Art Moderne: Département des Aigles* (Museum of Modern Art: Department of Eagles). In her essay, Krauss takes Broodthaers's central motif within this imaginary institutional setting, the figure of the (imperial) eagle with its wings outstretched and, in a highly speculative move, connects its analysis to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, a watercolor depicting a winged entity.¹⁰³ Employing Benjamin's reading in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* of Klee's image as the Angel of History, Krauss suggests an entirely new interpretation of both Broodthaers's eagle and the artist's overall implicit understanding of and orientation to the movement of time. Through Benjamin's interpretation of history, Broodthaers's eagle is assumed to be a creature whose wings, rather than moving with the winds of progress, are instead fighting against the whirlwind of the ever-mounting catastrophe engendered by its myth.¹⁰⁴

Given the references to progress in Agarwal's work, a similar reading can be made with respect to his evocation of another creature of flight. Agarwal's vulture is likewise not buoyed by the winds of history. In fact, it is a figure that is both caught by these currents and being liquidated by their ferocity. The woven monochrome wings suspended by Agarwal both above the museum staircase and over the Mandi House roundabout can be reinterpreted not just as a disavowal of commercialism, but as wings that are being propelled by a catastrophic force—that of the storm of history.

This is the idea that lies at the heart of the critique advanced in Agarwal's work—with one important twist. In his case, it is an indictment of the myth of progress drawn over the substance of life, as figured in the mimetic form of taxidermy. As taxidermy is inherently predicated on life's extinguishment, the artist has likewise problematized progress as a self-negating factor for our species. It is

103. Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Angel of History," *October* 134 (Fall 2010): 112–21; 116.

104. Krauss, 116. Benjamin wrote, "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm." Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 392, italics in original.

105. See Vidhi Doshi, "Fire Guts Delhi's Natural History Museum," *Guardian*, April 26, 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/26/massive-fire-guts-delhis-natural-history-museum>, as of June 11, 2018.

106. See Nida Najar, "Fire Destroys Natural History Museum in New Delhi," *New York Times*, April 26, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/world/asia/museum-fire-new-delhi.html, as of June 11, 2018.

107. See Jaideep Deo Bhanj, "Museum Memories Reduced to Dust," *The Hindu*, April 27, 2016, at



Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct?*, 2008, large-scale photographic installation, showing two taxidermy Oriental white-backed vultures, *48 Degrees Celsius Public.Art.Ecology*, Mandi House roundabout, New Delhi (photograph © Ravi Agarwal, provided by the artist)

as though Agarwal has elected to throw a spotlight on a specific detail within the wreckage of history glimpsed by Benjamin's back-pedaling angel: the pulverized presence of the environment and corporeal life itself. The image of museum vultures, gutted of their own flesh, greedily eating the living material they no longer possess, can be understood as a vision of a paradox that speaks to the historical and ecological conundrum driving the planet to extinction.

Coda

Early on the morning of April 26, 2016, a fire broke out on the sixth floor of the National Museum of Natural History in New Delhi, and the flames quickly spread down into the heart of the structure.¹⁰⁵ It was reported that the building's water system, which might have helped stop the fire and limit its damage, was not working.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, it took some two hundred firefighters nearly four hours to bring the blaze under control. However, this could not be accomplished before thousands of animal specimens housed within the museum were completely destroyed, including the Oriental white-backed vultures that have been the subject of this essay.¹⁰⁷ The attending Deputy Fire Chief, Rajesh Pawar, observed that the chemicals that had been used to preserve the taxidermy animals, which were "highly combustible," had helped to accelerate the blaze.¹⁰⁸

Born in the small pulp mill town of Powell River on Canada's west coast, Russell Stephens moved to North Vancouver with his family at the age of four. After receiving a BFA in film and fine arts from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, he worked for a number of years as an independent filmmaker. Stephens returned to academia to pursue a graduate degree in art history at the University of British Columbia, where he is currently a PhD candidate. His doctoral thesis focuses on the late Second Empire caricatures of Honoré Daumier.

www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/museum-memories-reduced-to-dust/article8525929.ece, as of June 11, 2018. See also Doshi.

108. "Fire Destroys Delhi's National Museum of Natural History," *Indian Express*, April 26, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/delhi-major-fire-breaks-out-in-ficci-building-in-mandi-house-2770475/>, as of June 11, 2018. "Unfortunately the museum has been completely gutted and evidently nothing has survived. It is a pity." Ravi Agarwal, email to the author, June 10, 2018.



BODYWARP: Seamstress

Performed at the Alice Gallery—a former brothel in Duwamish territory. In Seattle, Washington, sex work was an integral part of the early economy, and workers often listed their occupation as “seamstress.” *Seamstress* honors these sisters of the cloth through a site-specific performance of *BODYWARP* at the Alice Gallery, located in the Hamilton building—a former brothel in the Georgetown neighborhood, an early red-light district.

these and following pages:

Indira Allegra, three views of Seamstress, performance, 2018, Alice Gallery, Seattle (artwork © Indira Allegra; photographs by Alex Boeschenstein)





