FluX

Dystopia, Utopia, Heterotopia

Ravi Agarwal



gallery "espace"





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Is nature only an idea? Maybe it does not exist, but is only produced as a 'view.' Created solely through our social, poetic and political selves, nature becomes an imaginary repository of contemporary times. The ecological crisis cannot be 'fixed' as a return to Paradise, but needs a fundamental re-evaluation of our selves.

"First of all, the utopias. These are arrangements which have no real space. Arrangements which have a general relationship of direct or inverse analogy with the real space of society. They represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and in any case utopias are spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal. …..In contrast to the utopias, these places which are absolutely other with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias…. It is evident, though, that hetrotopias assume a wide variety of forms, to the extent that a single, absolutely universal form may not exist.

(Michel Foucault. Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias)





Dystopia

What is the nature of power and control in terms of social relationships and space?

“Empty” spaces – space that capitalism has left relatively undeveloped – is intrinsic to capitalism, since the laws of capital may dictate that a vacant lot is more profitable over a certain span of time than one that has been developed. Plot is a potential space, a limbo waiting to generate value. Capitalism moves onto this empty stage with its phantasmagoric carnival, leaving junkspace in its wake”

(Ecology without Nature, Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics, Timothy Morton)

Ecology? Is it not a network of sites and spaces in relationships to social power, ideas of the ‘self’ vis a vis the ‘other’ and their manifestations.

What is missing? Why does something disappear? Do we notice absence, or it just comes to us, as we helplessly learn to live with what is no longer present. Absences can change the way we feel in a place, or how we think of time. More than what is created, what is lost - makes us deal with our history and our memory.

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We are not sure how to think about sustainability. It is everything and anything. From more Capital to no- Capital. However sustainability is not only a word, it is a mirage like place which lies deep in the land of power. Does nature have to think of sustainability, when it is sustainable without us?

The house sparrow is not to be seen. What was a common house visitor is missing. The street performer is missing too. The *jadugar* has disappeared. The water in the pond is dry. Without water, there is no water pond. The streets are cleaner, but the waste picker is more furtive, more difficult to see – maybe he will disappear one day soon. Are these absences interconnected?

For too long we have argued for protecting the forest, for keeping what is there, almost like this is a religion, and hence unchangeable. If one protests too much, it is anti change and hence fixed in time, fossilized. However change is not a simple affair. Change exists at each level, all around us, and within us. Change in nature is different, it is a struggle for existence, where every organism attempts to survive. What survives for the moment is what establishes a mutually sustainable niche. There is a fine balance and if any one element is changed, the balance shifts, till a new balance is found. This evolutionary

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dialectic is the struggle, which is constant. In that sense change is constant. However in nature such change is not to be predicted, the outcome is not singular but multiple, and the balance is temporary and shifting.

This is obviously not the type of change we see in our cities. Here it is determined by capital and social power. Everyone or everything does not have the same chance to survive, and maybe even the balance is predetermined. Like a predator predetermines the life of its prey. When we pave all our green areas, birds do not nest in the trees, for they have nothing to eat. Worms live in the grass. Maybe as the city grows ‘greener’ the sparrows disappear. The river is dirty. It will be cleaned. There are big projects to do this, to create a channel of clean water. However a river is not a channel, it is an ecosystem, with a catchment area, and a water recharge function. The river will be cleaner, but it will also be dry if the water system around it is killed. The street performers cannot perform at the Red Fort anymore. The monument has been conserved. With the city being conserved, is it also losing street performers? The list goes on and on.



Dislocation Site



A tree or a building. We seem to be able to argue only in terms of functionality and aesthetics. However often this only leads us to a dead end, a cul-de-sac. The answer is predicted in the question. We need to look elsewhere.

Do we have the capacity to be sustainable at all? Can we play the game of being helpless and fragile as everything in nature is? Maybe absences are one way of thinking of today. Absences as markers of power and capital. There must be an ecology of change, only visible and marked by its fragments of absences.









Site Plan I







Utopia

"Reclaiming the riverfront ensures not only environmental integrity but also stimulates the economy. The aim is to achieve maximum economic benefit with minimum public investment to ensure a self sustaining setup. Thus the riverfront development will be based on financial and environmental catalysts. The revenue generated by the various activities will allow the riverfront to further develop park and trails, commercial sites and infrastructure improvement within the area for an economically and environmentally healthier riverfront. The healthier version is critical, as it is the formation for new long term economic growth in the city and the region."

(Zonal Development Plan for River Yamuna Riverfront, Zone O, 2009, Delhi Development Authority)

Everyday it looms larger. My neighborhood. The city. It towers over me. Where I could once see the blue sky, I am now faced with massive structures. Concrete. Gothic. Imposing. Violent. Iron everywhere I look. Earth dug up. Grass overturned. Concrete-being poured. Trees butchered or just disappeared. I gasp for air. Trapped into a space, which is imploding. Then it is time to retreat, into a self, hitherto undiscovered. Is that how prisoners survive? What is a violent encounter has the potential to become a

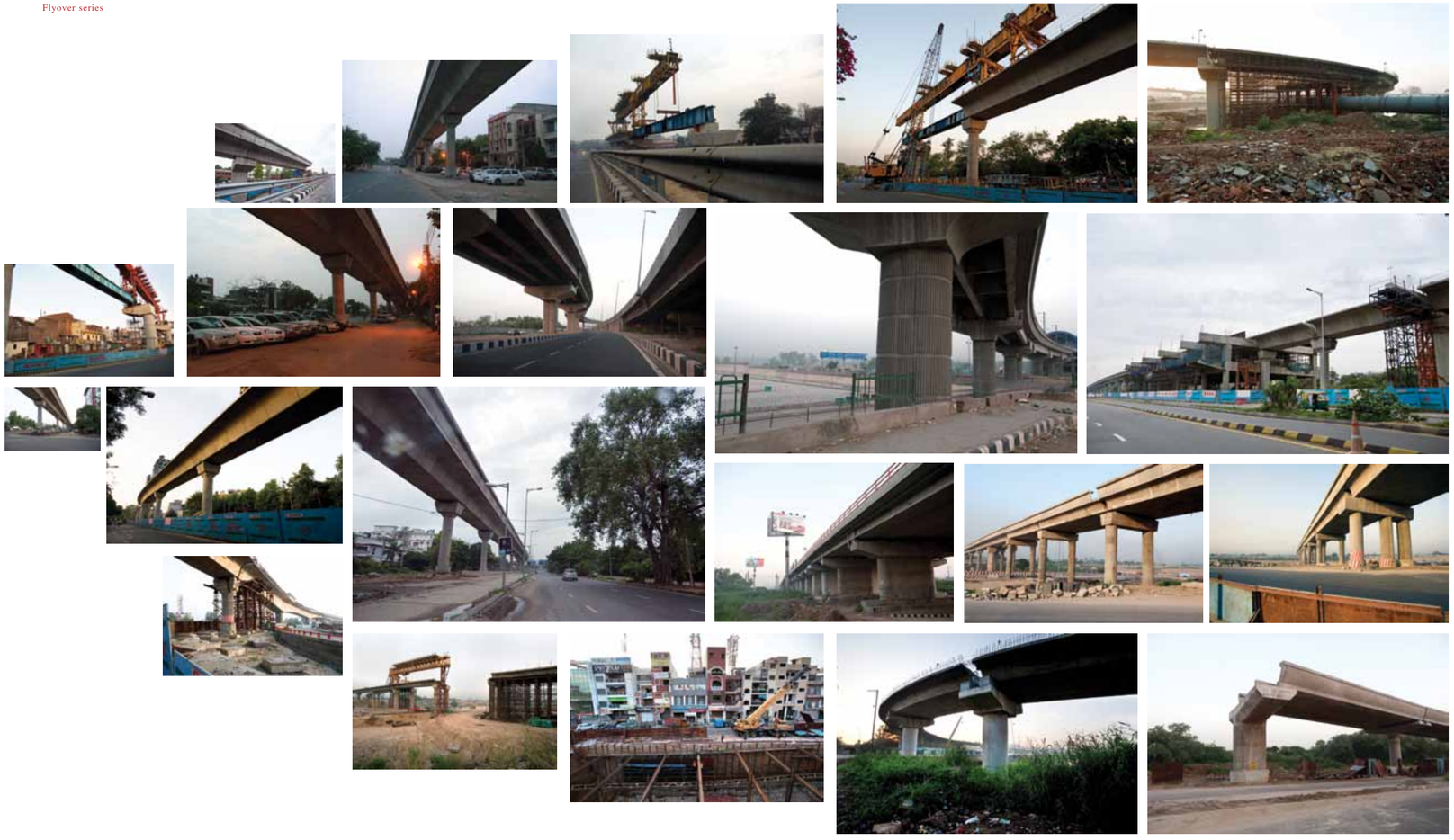
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meditative one. Is meditation only another way to survive? To shut off the world, and to immerse into the deepest realms of silence – like an ostrich – maybe.

The drain outside my street is now turned from grass to debris. It used to carry fresh water for centuries. The monsoon rains flowed over the ridge undulations and emptied into the water channels, leading to the river. It was a nice web of water, amongst which people lived. Now the web is tattered, in pieces, and black instead of a silvery white. Sewage, detritus of society flows freely, and as it must, it has its own smell. The grass of the drain was very green, since it was moist even in the worst summer. People always create sewage. Now it is cement and mortar. It had been promised a running track, a cycle track, a new recreation ground for the newly rich. It is only unfinished debris, with iron rods sticking out, and stagnant water. The money ran out, midway. Or maybe someone ran with the money. The dream promised, is now a nightmare. Unfinished promises of capital it seems are that. Nightmares.

On the highway outside the colony I live in, are three trees, in the middle of the road. There are no trees before these three and none after. Of course these three only a couple of years ago, were part of an avenue of trees, a kilometer long. Now this is concrete, tar

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and tiles. These three trees, were saved by those who lived across the street, in an attempt to save the view they had got used to; had grown up in. These people, did not want to have 30 trees planted many miles away, in compensation to cut these three. They wanted these three trees. The road authority did not understand this attachment to three trees, when instead they had planned a little grass path, with park benches and beautiful flowers. Park benches to watch the cars whizz past on both sides?! That of course if one could get to them across the mad suicidal road which had to be crossed. This they did not understand, the road authority. Only the people were persistent, and ultimately their doggedness won. The people who lived before these three trees were obviously not so persistent with their three trees, or maybe just did not care.

The riverbank, I knew so well, till just a couple of years ago, is gone. It is fenced, highway-ed, flyover-ed and policed. If it was inaccessible before, it is now even unapproachable. Large high mammoth structures. High skyline. Cars where birds were. The junk shops, the garbage collectors, the vegetable flotillas – just a continuous green fence.

Forest Morning I and II
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Heterotopia

All encounters with the ‘other’ (nature) are encounters with the nature of the ‘self.’

There are many unknowns. There are many attempts to explain and understand them.

From ideas of the historical or the metaphysical to ideas of knowledge, science.

However despite all this, experience is unpredictable, what is gleaned is uncertain and ambiguous.

What is the relationship the self has to the world outside the boundaries of the self? How does one relate to that reality or that imaginary? What are the ideas of pleasure and beauty, of pain and deprivation, and finally of the end of all experience – death. What is it, which is unknown?

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These are questions which do not have to be dealt with. One can just live in the everyday spectacle of life; or try and create an image, a spectacle, maybe a mirage we can hope for or believe in.

Nature is where I will rest. Where I will be. Even maybe what I am.

Ecology has become an ornament.

Nature which shaped the city once, is now being shaped by capital and power, instead of as a democratic idea of a common future.

Nature, is now in this violence, and unseparable from it.

Capital, ambition, power inhabit all moments and spaces around. There is no utopia left and escape is no longer possible. If one does not believe in that future which everything seems to be hurtling towards, then there is no hope, nothing to look forward to.











The beauty of nature cannot redeem anymore, since just below its surface it too is infested. The inner sanctum has been invaded. Every mystery must now be revealed and laid bare.

The dream must be grounded.











The Sewage Pond's Memoir

Ravi Agarwal (2010)

Video, 5.45 mins

The sewage pond lies in the centre of the ancient forest, surprisingly in the midst of the global city. It carries the detritus of people, absorbing their desires and memories into the silt of its marshy bed. My annual childhood visits to my old village home, have long since stopped. I re-visit the locked *haveli* to reconnect to my past. The unchanging sewage pond resonates this moment, drawing me again to its edge, as it had done over the years, showing me a future.

RAVI AGARWAL

Lives and works in New Delhi

Ravi Agarwal is an artist, environmental activist, writer and curator. He has pursued a photography practice integrally with his other pursuits and has been invited to participate in several important shows, including Documenta XI (2002). He is the founder of the well known Indian NGO Toxics Link and has been internationally awarded for his work.

His earlier work, in the documentary oeuvre, encompasses 'nature', 'work,' 'labour,' and the 'street,' while more recent work has been traversing questions of the self and ecological sustainability based on explorations of 'personal ecologies.' He now works with photography, video and installation.

Solo Shows

2008 *An Other Place,* Gallery Espace, New Delhi,
2006 *Alien Waters*, India International Centre, New Delhi,
2000 *Down and Out*, New Delhi ,India Habitat Centre, Ahmedabad, Gujarat India, The Hutheesingh Visual Arts Gallery, Amsterdam - National Vakbondsmuseum
1995 *A Street View*, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi

Selected Curated, Group, Residency Exhibitions

2010 *Art Celebrates 2010! Sports and the City,* curated Rupika Chawala, LKA, New Delhi
2010 *Where Three Dreams Cross*, curated Sunil Gupta et al, Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Winterthur Fotomuseum, Switzerland
2009 *Detour*, curated Ranjit Hoskote, Gallery Chemould, New Delhi
2009 *Astonishment of Being*, curated Deeksha Nath, Birla Academy for Arts and Culture, Kolkotta
2009 *Recycle*, curated Bhavna Vij, Travencore House, New Delhi, Nature Morte, Kolkota
2008/ 11 (traveling) *Indian Highway*, curated Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gunnar Kvaran, traveling exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London (2008), Astrep Fernley Museum, Oslo, Norway (2009)
2008 *Extinct,* curated Pooja Sood, 48deg C, Public Eco-Art International festival, New Delhi
2008 *Still/Moving Image*, curated Deeksha Nath, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
2008 *Click! Contemporary Photography in India*, curated Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, Vadhera Gallery, New Delhi
2007 *Horn Please*, *The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art,* curated Bernhard Fibicher, Suman Gopinath, Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.
2007 *Public Places, Private Spaces*, curated Gayatri Sinha, Zetta Emmons, Newark Museum, Newark and Minneapolis (2008) USA.
2006 *Watching Me Watching India,* curated by Gayatri Sinha and Celina Lunsford, Frankfurt Fotographie International, Frankfurt, Germany

2003 *Crossing Generations: DiVERGE: Forty years of Gallery Chemould*, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, curated by Geeta Kapoor and Chaitanya
2002 *Documenta 11*, curated Okwui, Enzwor, Kassel, Germany
1996 *2nd Biennial of Creative Photography*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
1995 *First National Exhibition of Photography*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
1993 Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition, Bombay, India.

Photographic Books and Catalogues

In the Shadow of the Vulture, 48 deg C, Public Eco Art, Goethe Institute, New Delhi, 2009
Immersion. Emergence, Youthreach, New Delhi, 2007
Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism New Delhi: Oxford University Press and Amsterdam, University Press, 2000
Making a Difference, A collection of essays, ed. Rukmani Shekhar, Spic Mackay, New Delhi, 1998
Portfolios in *The India Magazine,* 1995 and 1997
Portfolio in The *First City Magazine,* 2003
Monthly Visual Column in *First City Magazine,* since Feb 2005

Selected Publications

1. *Fight for a Forest*, Nature without Borders, Seminar 613, ed. Mahesh Ranagarajan and M.D.Madhusudan, September 2010
2. *Hi Tech Heaps, Forsaken Lives* (co-authored), Challenging the Chip, Labour Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry, ed Ted Smith et al, Temple University Press, USA, 2007
3. *Standardised, packaged, ready for consumption*, Sarai Reader 05, Bare Acts, Sarai – CSDS, Delhi, 2005
4. *Beyond environmental standards, from techno centric to people centric environmental governance*. Troubled Times, Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extremes." SDPI, Islamabad, 2006
5. *Resisting technology, regaining a personal ecology*, Sarai Reader, 03, Shaping Technologies, 2003
6. *Corporate Social responsibility, a critical perspective from India*, Cometische humanisering? Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistic University Press, Amsterdam, 2005
7. *Walk on the Wild Side,* (co-authored) Green Book, ed Ruskin Bond, Roli Books, 2003

Other

Arts Residency, Basel, Pro Helvetia, 2009
Khoj Peers Arts Residency, 2007
IFCS- UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety, 2008
Ashoka Fellowship, social entrepreneurship, 1997

Web resources

www.raviagarwal.com, www.toxicslink.org

List of plates

A) Photographic prints

(All works editions of 5 + 2 AP)

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8. After the Flood (6 images, 40.5 x 26.5 cms each) pg 24, 27, 28 & endpapers

B) Video

The Sewage Pond's Memoir, pg 30

Ravi Agarwal (2010)

Video, 5.45 mins

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16, Community Centre
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www.galleryespace.com

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