



## Of Value and Labour

Ravi Agarwal

**The Guild**  
*Art Gallery*

16 December, 2011 - 2 January, 2012



The interrupted cycle of nature is inscribed by mass produced commodities which serve to fulfill wants and desires, and direct lives and materials. “A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside of us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither are we here concerned to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.” wrote Marx.

Value is added throughout the chain with labour and technology, as both become equated in monetary terms. An ‘aura’ of desirability determines the price, till it becomes worthless, as waste, only to be recovered back into the commodity cycle by the labour of the waste picker. There is an ongoing theatre of aura and decay. Intertwined in this economy are narratives of many lives, often homogenized through contestations of power and powerlessness.

Some of the works being presented in the exhibition were documented in a monograph titled ‘Down and Out : Labouring under Global Capitalism,’ Jan Breman, Arvind Das and Ravi Agarwal, OUP, 2000, New Delhi. The body of the work was produced between 1996 and 2000 and was sited in South Gujarat, in and around the city of Surat, as a collaborative project with Jan Breman, the well known Dutch labour anthropologist who has been researching in India for over 45 years.

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

## Stories from the “Theatre of ‘Aura’ and Decay:” A Talk with Ravi Agarwal

—Maya Kóvskaya, PhD

Ravi Agarwal’s social conscience has been a constant in his rich body of multidisciplinary artworks. Adept at grounding the macro-level big human questions of our times in the micro-practices of lived experience of his interlocutors, and acutely sensitive to questions of power and representation, Agarwal’s work frequently engages marginalized populations, such as the laborers in his acclaimed series “Down and Out.” Balancing his commitment to activism and social justice with his preoccupations with questions about “nature, work, labor and the street,” Agarwal offers ethnographically sensitive works that explore the human condition through the quotidian stories of everyday people’s lives.

8 January, 2012. New Delhi, India

Maya Kóvskaya (MK): Since part of the power and beauty of your work is the place of human lives and their stories in your oeuvre, so I’d like to spend a lot of this interview grounding your larger preoccupations in your recent solo exhibition at The Guild in Mumbai, “Of Value and Labour.” How did you become who you are, and what shaped you as an artist and public intellectual?

Ravi Agarwal (RV): I grew up in times where knowledge was considered the future, modernity. These times shaped ideas, thoughts and values. There was idealism, art and literature. Money was secondary. Photography became a preoccupation early on, at age 12 or 13. Professionally though, I felt compelled to lead a more ‘useful’ life, and I never wanted to be a commercial or journalistic photographer. Twenty years later activism became my way to ‘act,’ and artistic expression was almost everything else I cared for.

MK: How have you managed to balance the requirements of your artwork with your political agenda and maintain such a light touch in the work?

RA: Activism requires sure action, a certainty about a future, while art is about being vulnerable, listening, looking, feeling, exploring. We can never know, only explore. There is always another context, many uncertainties. My artistic forms are not an attempt, they merely emerge, maybe they are a reflection of an uncertainty.



Ravi Agarwal, The Transaction, archival digital print, 42” x 56”, edition of 1/5, 2011



Ravi Agarwal, Commodity, acrylic digital prints, 18" x 18" each (set of 4), edition of 1/5, 2011

MK: Describe a watershed experience that transformed you and made you see the world differently.

RA: "Down and Out" was a transformative experience. Through entering a world of human deprivation and powerlessness, I was invited into a world of human dignity and intensity. It questioned my assumptions about people, about poverty and forced me to think of my own locations, confront issues of representation and the idea of politics.

MK: Who is your art for? Does this vary from project to project? Is there a difference between the Public Art projects and works shown in a gallery?

RA: Art is firstly personal, a discovery and a way of making tangible the inexpressible to oneself. The challenge is to find the core of what something is about. Public art has to have a modified language, even if the core idea is the same. I feel public art has to have a 'purpose' beyond the art itself.

MK: What are the greatest challenge facing contemporary art today? Is there a way to co-opt the commoditization cycle and make consumption into something that can transform minds and practices?

RA: Challenges include determining what counts as "the contemporary?" What constitutes the domain of the 'now' and its relationship to the past? Are there always many co-existing trajectories? What should one include (or exclude), in this 'post post' world, as art or art practice? When everything is commodified, the idea of the 'radical' or the 'transformative'

becomes uncertain. There seems to be no anchor outside of capitalism. We may not know how/where to escape anymore.

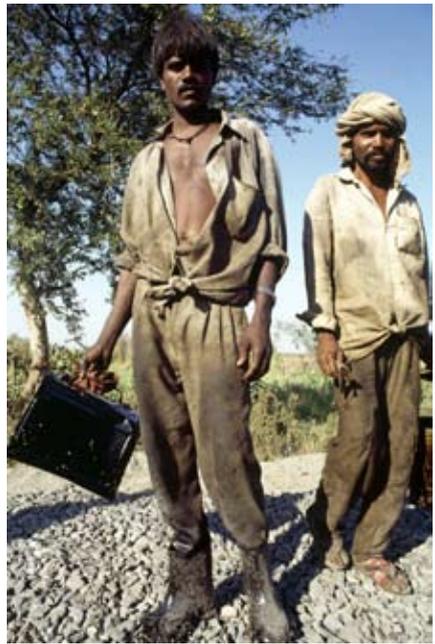
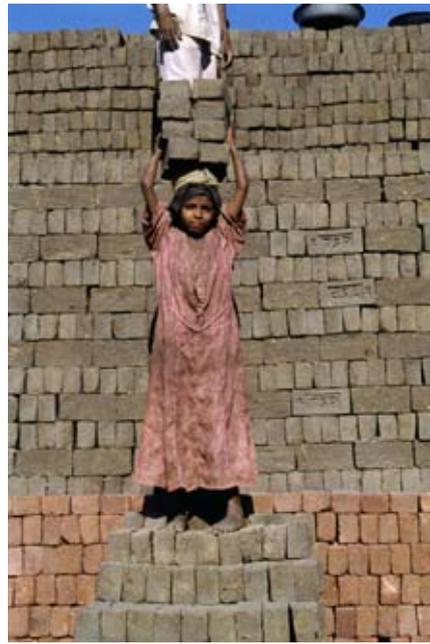
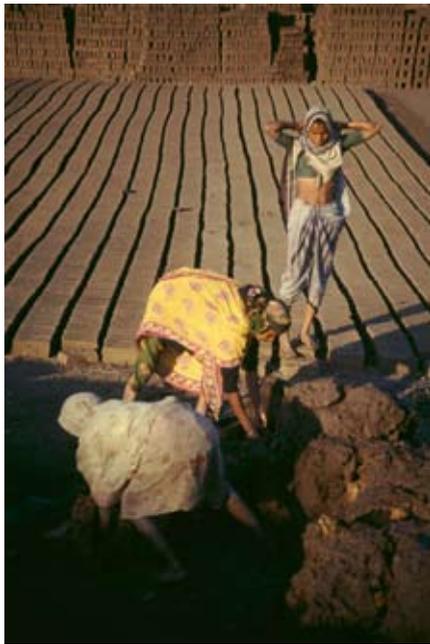
MK: If part of the problem with our current socio-economic order is the way in which human beings, particularly people subsisting low in the economic hierarchy, are systematically de-humanized, can art play a role in re-presenting that "stolen" humanity back to people, reminding them of their own worth?

RA: Good and powerful journalism is probably better in reminding the world of its "stolen" humanity. However art has the possibility of touching another sphere of human life. It is like a wedge, an interstice.

"Down and Out" was meant to be a document of working people's lives. It reflected a human condition situated within our economic and political systems. The labourers in the series probably never saw the pictures we showed in Gujarat. The book was never proposed as 'art,' or a coffee table fetish object. The price was subsidized to encourage circulation. We were deeply conscious of our responsibility, but in the end, it is only evidential.

Personally, the project became an encounter with the human spirit, its resilience, dignity and celebration. It was a world, which could not afford any pretensions, where life was immediate, here and now. I always saw something else besides the poverty and politics, even though those were undeniably omnipresent.

MK: Part of the de-humanization process that subjugates laboring people is a discursive



transformation of subjects into objects. Can art help to reverse this process?

RA: Unknowingly we internalize the dynamics of 'power' and create ideas of human beings as 'those people.' I remember seeing a lone man breaking stones in a quarry in the scorching mid-summer heat. It seemed so futile, one stone, one man, a huge sprawling quarry. Yet when I approached him, he stopped, looked me in the eye, lit a 'beedi' and gave me a half knowing smile! It was an amazing moment - a faceless speck had become a self-assured person. I constantly experienced such moments. The project 'humanized' me. A photograph is a mirror of the photographer. The problematic of representations can never be escaped. Art can make us more aware and human, conscious of our follies.

MK: Marx talked about how "false consciousness" holds together exploitative arrangements. Unequal and exploitative social and economic orders are often held in place in part by what is called "the internalization of oppressor consciousness," in which "the oppressed" identify with their oppressors and adopt their values. Have you witnessed this process at work? Does it make sense to talk of "oppressor consciousness" if the real oppressor is not simply a group of people bent on exploitation, but rather an ideological orientation and structure of values that treats the world as material to be exploited?

RA: Poverty is multidimensional, historical and caused by social structures that 'normalize' this to maintain a status quo. The oppression I saw was deep, eons old, played out through caste and class, and disempowering. There was no protest of the mafia like condition in the diamond cutting operations or the harshness of the brick kilns, or of child labor, even though such work is illegal. Those who paid the wages were called "mai baaps" (my masters). I once saw a rare public protest by diamond workers, quelled by police. The exploitation chain was both vertical and horizontal. The local trade union took money from both the worker and the owner. Everyone played to keep the other in a place where s/he could be exploited to maintain the power equation.

MK: Some argue that in our contemporary order of things, existence and worth have been reduced to possession: "to have is to be, and to have-not is to be worthless," as it were.

RA: Values such as 'worth/worthless' are imposed onto lives, putting them into a framework of hierarchies and power. The sugarcane cutters went back to their camp each evening after 12 hours of backbreaking work for paltry wages. They cooked, sat around a bonfire and sang. They had nothing, yet they seemed to have it all. It was very humbling.

MK: Some have argued that we live in times that alienate us from our sense of agency, leaving us



feeling powerless and helpless in the face of large “forces” that seem to control our lives. Was there a sense of agency among the people you worked with, in spite of their difficult conditions? Can we enlarge people’s sense of their own agency and powers, or are attempts at such interventions inevitably paternalistic and doomed to reinscribe patterns of dependence and passivity?





RA: Agency needs conditions where it becomes possible to realize it, though empowerment, education and rights. Rights must be operationalised to create an active citizenship. However agency also needs also to be internalized. For most workers things are so far removed, that they do not even try. I met a tea stall owner, who had set up his shop outside the factory where he had been fired unjustly, and betrayed by his union. He told me that he was waiting for the day he could take revenge on the factory owner, but such instances were rare.

Ravi Agarwal, Down and Out series, digital archival prints from transparencies, 20" x 30", edition 5, (1996-2000)

## RAVI AGARWAL



### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

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

### MUSEUM / INSTITUTIONAL EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 Newtopia, curated Katherina Gregos, Mechelen Museums various, Belgium
- 2012 Critical Mass, Contemporary Art from India, curated Rotem Ruff, Tel Aviv Museum of Contemporary Art May 2012
- 2012 Z.N.E, Examples to Follow, curated Adrienne Goehler, Traveling exhibition, Berlin, Mumbai, Adis Ababba, Beijing.
- 2011 Generation in Transition. New Art from India curated by Magda Kardasz, Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, Lithuania
- 2011 Generation in Transition, New Art from India, curated Madga Kardasz, Zacheta National Gallery for Art, Warsaw, Poland
- 2011 The Eye is a Lonely Hunter, Images of Humankind, curated Katerina Gregos and Solvej Helweg Ovesen, Fotofestival Mannheim\_Ludwigshafen\_Heidelberg, Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany
- 2011 After the Crash, curated Camilla Boehimo, Orto Botanico Museum, Rome
- 2010 Where Three Dreams Cross, curated Sunil Gupta et al, Whitechapel Gallery, London, and Winterthur Fotomuseum, Switzerland
- 2009 Astonishment of Being, curated Deeksha Nath, Birla Academy for Arts and Culture, Kolkotta

- 2008/11 Indian Highway, curated Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gunnar Kvaran, traveling exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London (2008); Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, Norway (2009); HEART Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark (2010); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon-France (2011); MAXXI, Rome, Italy (2011)
- 2008 Extinct part of 48deg C, Public Eco-Art International festival, New Delhi, curated Pooja Sood,
- 2008 Still/Moving Image, curated Deeksha Nath, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
- 2007 Frieze Art Fair, Khoj Artists Workshop Stall, London
- 2007 Horn Please, The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art ,curated Bernhard Fibicher, Suman Gopinath, Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland.
- 2007 Public Places, Private Spaces, curated Gayatri Sinha, Zetta Emmons and Paul Sternberger, Newark Museum, Newark and Minneapolis (2008) USA.
- 2006 Watching Me Watching India ▽ curated by Gayatri Sinha and Celina Lunsford, Frankfurt Fotografische International, Frankfurt, Germany
- 2003 Crossing Generations: DiVERGE: Forty years of Gallery Chemould, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, curated by Geeta Kapoor and Chaitanya Sambrani
- 2002 Documenta XI, curated Okwui Enwezor, Kassel, Germany
- 1996 2nd Biennial of Creative Photography, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 Art HK, presented by The Guild Gallery, Mumbai
- 2012 Chennai Art Fair, presented by The Guild Gallery, Mumbai
- 2012 India Art Summit, presented by Gallery Espace, New Delhi
- 2011 Staging Selves - Power, Performativity & Portraiture, curated Maya Kovskaya, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai
- 2011 Tolstoy Farm, curated Gayatri Sinha, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
- 2011 India Art Summit, presented by Gallery Espace, New Delhi
- 2010 CWG, Sports and the City, curated Rupika Chawla, LKA, New Delhi
- 2009 Detour, curated Ranjit Hoskote, Gallery Chemould, New Delhi
- 2009 The Purple Wall, curated Gayatri Sinha, India Art Summit, 2009
- 2009 Recycle, curated Bhavna Vij, Travencore House, New Delhi, Nature Morte,

- Kolkata
- 2008 Click! Contemporary Photography in India, curated Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, Vadehra Gallery, New Delhi
- 1995 First National Exhibition of Photography, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
- 1993 Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition, Bombay, India.

#### CURATTON

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

#### BOOKS AND CATALOGUES

- Yamuna Manifesto (forthcoming) ed. Ravi Agarwal and Till Krause  
Chemicals, Environment, Health: A Global Management Perspective co authored, Taylor and Francis, 2011
- Flux: Dystopia, Utopia, Heterotopia, Gallery Espace, 2011
- In the Shadow of the Vulture, 48 deg C, Public Eco Art, Goethe Institute, New Delhi, 2009
- Have you seen the flowers on the river ?, Khoj, New Delhi
- Immersion. Emergence, Youthreach, New Delhi, 2007
- Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism , co-edited, Jan Breman et al, Oxford University Press and Amsterdam, University Press, 2000
- Making a Difference, A collection of essays, ed. Rukmani Shekhar, Spic Mackay, New Delhi, 1998
- Portfolios in The India Magazine, 1995 and 1997
- Portfolio in The First City Magazine, 2003
- Monthly Photo Column in First City Magazine, since Feb 2005

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

1. Contemporary Flows, Fluid Times, Art Fair Magazine, February 2011
2. Fight for a Forest, Nature without Borders, Seminar 613, ed. Mahesh Ranagarajan and M.D.Madhusudan, September 2010
3. Hi Tech Heaps, Forsaken Lives (co-authored), Challenging the Chip, Labour Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry, ed Ted Smith et al, Temple University Press, USA, 2007
4. Standardised, packaged, ready for consumption, Sarai Reader 05, Bare Acts, Sarai – CSDS, Delhi, 2005

5. Beyond environmental standards, from techno centric to people centric environmental governance. 'Troubles Times, Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extremes.' SDPI, Islamabad, 2006
6. Resisting technology, regaining and a personal ecology, Sarai Reader, 03, Shaping Technologies, 2003
7. Corporate Social responsibility, a critical perspective from India, Cometische humanisering? Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistic University Press, Amsterdam, 2005
8. Walk on the Wild Side, (co-authored) Green Book, ed Ruskin Bond, Roli Books, 2003

#### REVIEWS / ARTICLES

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

#### OTHER

Conceived and organized:

Yamuna – Elbe, Art and ecology seminar, December 2010, Goethe Institute, New Delhi ([www.yamuna-elbe.org](http://www.yamuna-elbe.org))

Invited to: Arts Residency, Basel, Pro Helvetia, 2009, Khoj Peers Arts Residency, 2007

Awarded: IFCS- UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety, 2008, Ashoka Fellowship, social entrepreneurship, 1997

#### WEB RESOURCES

[www.raviagarwal.com](http://www.raviagarwal.com), [www.toxicslink.org](http://www.toxicslink.org), [www.galleryspace.com](http://www.galleryspace.com), [www.guildindia.com](http://www.guildindia.com)  
[www.yamuna-elbe.de](http://www.yamuna-elbe.de)

© The Guild

All rights reserved under international Copyright conventions. No part of this catalogue may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

**The Guild**  
*Art Gallery*

02/32, Kamal Mansion, 2nd floor,  
Arthur Bunder Road, Colaba,  
Mumbai 400 005, India.  
Tel: +91 22 2288 0195 / 2288 0116  
theguildart@yahoo.com / theguildart@gmail.com  
www.guildindia.com