Part I Artist’s Report

Have you seen the flowers on the river?

Artist’s statement KHOJ eco-art residency, January 2007

My practice as an environmentalist and a photographer, has increasingly been rooted in my understanding of the self as interlinked into a network of inter-related ecologies, or as a ‘personal ecology.’ Ecology is not an isolated term for me, but one which shows inter–relationships. The river is not a mere water body flowing through the city, but as part of a network of myriad types of relationships each based on an exchange of various sorts, including with myself. However it seems that the city is not only unaware of the river itself, it is now quite oblivious of the deep connections that exist. It is startling how all these change changes as the river passes through rural into a highly urbanized Delhi. Vegetables, flowers, water, sand, sewage, junk, as well as a place for livelihoods, and of peace, quietude and tranquillity, are all part of that exchange.

Sites of Exchange: Flower fields and Sinks On the river itself, the flower fields of the river are where people grow marigolds to make a livelihood. The beauty of the flower is its exchange value, which in turn supports a sustainable local economy. The river provides the natural soil fertility and the easily available ground water, along with its own land, the sandy riverbed, as a site for cultivation. One acre of land can yield over 15 tonnes of flowers, zafriis, basanti and gaindas, in one 7 to 9 month long season of flowers. The flowers are grown and plucked by family and relatives and sold mostly in the Fatehpuri mandi in Old Delhi. Here, one of the largest retail flower markets in North India, tonnes of flowers are sold each morning in a matter of a few hours. From here they travel to temples, homes, onto truck bonnets as garlands, or as adornments in weddings and religious rituals. Often they land up back in the river as decaying garbage and debry.

Simultaneously the city uses water from the river and throws it back as sewage. Each tap and water basin is almost literally connected to the river waters. While the river bemoans a ‘dirty and polluted’ river, it is unconscious of its own role in making it so. Over 3000 million liters of sewage finds its way into the river from sinks, bathtubs, sewerage pipes etc.. each day.

The local economy of the land is based on its fertility. However the price of land in the city is changing the economy around that sustenance. Land near Wazirabad, (near the flower fields) even though being part of the sandy ‘river bed,’ is now priced at over 3 lakh rupees an acre as demand for ‘new’ land sours in the dense city. Selling it could make more money than growing flowers or vegetables might. The ‘fertility of capital’ overtakes the ‘fertility of land.’ The riverbed is increasingly being acquired for building stadiums, large temples and now the Commonwealth Games village. Land and ecology are inseparable, as is the relationship between the ecology of nature and of the ‘self.’ The changing ecology of the flower fields is the crumbling ecology of the ‘self’ in these times. The script seems to be prewritten. The river is timeless. The river is dead.
Objective: As a follow up of the photo based work I did between 2004 and 2006, called Alien Waters, during this residency I further explore the question of ecology and the self.

The practice revolved around three explorations. 

a) To think of the river as ‘beautiful’ and fertile and not ‘dirty’
b) To explore the interconnection of the river to the city with flowers and sinks. 
c) To see the river as a site for global capital and change, as against the local economy.

The Practice As a follow up of the photo based work I did between 2004 and 2006, called Alien Waters, in the residency I further explore the question of sustainability and the self.

1. I photographed the cycle of flower growing, harvesting, selling at the Fatehpuri mandi along with researching the economic and social questions around this activity.

2. I printed a postcard with the flower fields and requested my friends that I visit them at their homes and photograph their sinks – the point where they release the waste water which enters the river finally. I also gave them a postcard with flowers to them, asking them to visit my blog made for this residency and see the river along with me. (http://haveyouseentheriver.blogspot.com) I wanted them to think of the river as “beautiful” and not ‘dirty.” To reimaging the river and re-relate to it.

3. I photographed the sinks in their homes. Both the flowers and the sinks were put up in one room at KHOJ, interceped with post-its with field notes written on them.

4. I did a 3-minute video of the action of women plucking the flowers on the flower fields.

5. I also did a photo-based video on the idea of clean water being polluted.

6. I did two installations on the river bed near Palla village. They consisted of a cotton thread (used by masons) grid made on the sand and anchored with four bricks. In the grid I first erected 3-4 ft girders in the sand. Next I impaled the sand with about 100, 2 ft long butcher knives, I had acquired for the purpose from a butcher at the Idgah slaughter house. Both these installations were photographed. The girder installation was recreated at KHOJ on the open day with a photograph as a backdrop.

7. I did another staged photograph at the river bank at Jaitpur village. This consisted of a household sink filled with marigolds on the riverbank.

8. I put up a small video projection with vibrating, barely readable text on the river and its change at KHOJ.

9. On the first day of the residency I filled a glass tank with Yamuna Sand and threw in some seeds. I watered the sand everyday, and photographed and watched the seeds germinate and grow. I placed this in KHOJ on the open day, as a sign of fertility of the river sand.

List of Works Produced:

1. Video : The Flower Pluckers – 3 mins
2. Video: Black Waters - 1 min
3. Photo portfolio – “The flower economy” and “sinks” and postcard
4. 2 light box based photographs (6ft x 4 ft) installed on open day.
5. Installations on the river – 3 nos
6. Fertile Sands
7. Post –its and slideshow on river text.

Publications and dissemination:

1. Ongoing blogsite
3. Write up by Emma Ridgeway – RCA
4. Reported in various media including page in Time Out magazine.
5. Other dissemination also taking place through KHOJ.

Part II – Residency Report

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Feedback:

I thoroughly enjoyed the residency. It helped create time out of my work in other areas to think about the issue and create a wide variety of works. I used the opportunity to do site based installations as well as video based works for the first time. Overall it helped me immensely in thinking of my photo-based practice in multidimensional ways and to expand my grammar, and helped me grow as an artist. I managed to create many types of work in a very short period of time. Some works too have come into wider circulation.

I am deeply thankful to KHOJ, and to its entire team for their energy and supportive spirit.

Suggestions for improvement: More time to critically interact with other non-participating artists about the work during the residency, will be further helpful.

Ravi Agarwal