

“When the River of Life Nears Zero Time: Vibha Galhotra’s (In)Sanity In The Age Of Reason”

M. Neelika Jayawardane



As I write about Vibha Galhotra’s work from Upstate New York, where I live and work, we should be in the depths of winter. It is the last week of February, and temperatures should sit well below zero Celsius. There should be mounds of old, dirty snow on the roadsides, tainted by de-icing mixes of rock salt and sodium or potassium chloride, scraped aside by the army of snowploughs that troll the highways and byways after each snowfall. Low clouds should be greying each day, with barely a hint of the nearing spring equinox. So harsh is the long winter in this post-industrial city – with little to prettify its rows of abandoned warehouses and obsolete smokestacks – that there is no month in which we long more for Spring than during winter’s last stretch in February. Yet, this morning, I woke up to thunderstorms and torrential rain. The tulip and crocus bulbs I planted in the autumn – late March harbingers of spring, antidote to the rusting cityscape – are already sending up their long green leaves.

This environmental and climate “weirding” is how most people in this region, deeply invested in the brand of political conservatism specific to the U.S. – one that dictates that climate change is a “liberal” invention intended to curb industry and gum up progress – have been forced to realise that something is wrong. Although it is commonplace today to hear news reports about noxious spills of livestock faecal matter from factory farms, exploding oil rigs that destroy an entire Gulf’s ecosystem, meltdowns at nuclear plants poisoning surrounding farmland, climate science literacy alone has not been sufficient to change minds. In the face of push-back and misinformation promulgated by lobbyists trained to oppose environmental protection laws, and the politicians whose careers and campaigns powerful industry leaders fund, science seems to be losing. Years of scientific research, with facts, figures, and graphs to support claims of imminent environmental collapse, seem powerless. Rationality – that hallmark characteristic of the Enlightenment, on which modern (European) man’s superiority over beast and nature was constructed – has not been enough.

As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin argue, the emergence of an appreciation for the beauty of industrialisation and destroyed environments is intimately linked to imperial ventures; in their introduction to *Art in the Anthropocene*, they note that according to visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, “[t]he aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.”¹ We can see this fascination with the altered environment through “the ever more colourful sunsets caused by particulate matter in the atmosphere, or to the aestheticized presentation of environmental destruction or explosive urbanization in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky and Vincent Laforet respectively”². Jessica Lack, too, notes, “art about man’s impact on the environment, spearheaded by the land art movement in the 1960s, was largely fatalistic and sought to reveal its grubby beauty.”³ As examples, Lack reminds us of Richard Billingham’s “amber-lit photographs of a deprived industrial backwater near Coventry, The Black Country, or Tomoko Takahashi’s seemingly chaotic installations of modern detritus.”

What does it mean for artists to work within a world that is undeniably altered and possibly irreversibly damaged by human activity? What does it mean for artists, and their visual practices, to encounter the Anthropocene, without simply aesthetically arresting works that inevitably draw attention to the artist and normalise devastating problems? And will their singular, often locally-focused efforts undermine the need for more systemic, interdisciplinary changes? Even as we feel our impotence in the face of catastrophic changes to the five great elements, water, earth, fire, air, and space or the panchabhuta – which, according to Hindu mythology, is the basis of all cosmic creation – can artists and art become more relevant – more present, more here – even as we feel our impotence in the face of catastrophic changes? Most importantly of all, can aesthetic practices – and audience encounters with art – be fashioned in such a way that we are better able to address the social, economic, and political implications of climate change? That is, can art and aesthetics – often a practice of the elite – properly address the fact that the Anthropocene era will effect more damage on the daily, lived experiences of the poor, the marginalised, and disenfranchised, partnering and including their political presence?

These are questions that conceptual artist Vibha Galhotra attempts to address in her exhibition, (IN)SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON. What artistic expression can she, as an artist, thinker, environmental activist and ordinary inhabitant of Delhi, find in the effluvial sludge clogging up the Yamuna River – this undeniable, material, and visible toxic evidence of the slow devastation of the health of an entire city’s inhabitants? One cannot walk in to Galhotra’s exhibition expecting “prettiness” to meditate the troubling realities that she addresses. Like other artists whose work recognises that we have, irreversibly, “entered the ‘Anthropocene’ – a new geologic era marked by the impact of human activity on the earth” – her work also engages in a variety of modes, “ranging from critique to practical demonstrations and shading into other current tendencies like social practice, relational aesthetics, environmental activism and systems theory.”⁴

In “The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP 21,” Heather Davis beautifully renders the feelings that accompany the slow suffocation and poisoning of life forms in ethereal, poetic language. She illustrates how the very molecules of which we, as human beings, are composed are poorer because of pollution and species extinction: *“Every time we breathe, we pull the world into our bodies... We become the outside through our breath, our food, and our porous skin... We have come into existence with and because of so many others, from carbon to microbes to dogs... [but we] are losing, with the increase in aromatic hydrocarbons and methane and carbon, the animals and plants and air and water that compose us.”*⁵

Galhotra’s work – like Davis’ writing – requires an emotional and psychological engagement; it demands that we meditate on our daily breath as an essential part of our ecological awareness, reconnecting us to indigenous practices that interconnect human hopes and dreams with flora and fauna, fire and water, earth, sun, stars, and the atmosphere. It insists that we bend our practices according to seasonal changes. It also requires our rational modernity to be part of this process, calling for our intellectual, scientific, and political engagement.

The space that her multimedia installations occupy, for this exhibition, spans about 2500 square feet, which is divided into several rooms through which observers can meander in small groups. Galhotra’s practice ranges across various mediums, including photography, animation, found objects, performative objects, installation and sculpture, and site-specific works and public art interventions that create experiential spaces investigating the age of Anthropocene; here, she uses abstractions of organic processes, which are divided into five sections meant to evoke one of the five elements: water, earth, fire, air, and space. These elements are woven together to present a narrative about the sustainable, and – more often – the destructive ways in which we approach these elements. In each room is a glimpse into the death-processes inherent to building and construction – practices that are about constructing immortality, rather than creating living and sustainable spaces.



ACCELERATION / ghungroos, fabric , wood and steel / 2x117 in / 2017

As her practice draws its inspiration from the manifesto 4000 AD by Stanley Broun (published as an artist’s book in 1964), Galhotra employs the manifesto metaphorically to signal her own concerns; for instance, the pieces Broun considers to be his earliest works were collaborative works with passers-by who were unaware of their creative activity – or the weight of their footprint on the environment. He “laid paper sheets on the street and an unsuspecting cyclist or pedestrian created the art work as they cycled or walked over them. Without realizing it, the passers-by became anonymous partners in these works capturing movement and time.”⁶ Similarly, Galhotra mirrors Broun’s artwork and environmental concerns, by capturing the ways in which our daily actions and

journeys leave an indelible track through the cityscape.

The massive new work **ACCELERATION** uses her signature material ghungroo to follow the shape of the graph that measures our progress into the Age of Anthropocene. This graph is based on Will Steffen's climatic change graph depicting the "great acceleration." It begins at about 1750 and continues to the present day, showing how increases in human agricultural activity causes gradual increases in concentrations of CO2 and methane, culminating in a sharp spike, commonly called "the Great Acceleration." The levels of CO2, methane, and toxic materials grow ever higher at the advent of the Industrial Revolution and its attendant exploitation of fossil fuels. At the beginning of the nuclear age in the mid-1940s, we notice, for the first time, traces of radioactive materials in soil, and ozone depletion. Together with decreases in potable water, increases in temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere and polar icecap melt, The Great Acceleration is accompanied by ever-exponential increases in population growth and energy use, as well as ever-higher levels of species extinction. Galhotra's ghungroo work attempts to draw our attention to this beautiful, toxic, and inevitable disaster, twinkling their metallic warning.

The form of the ghungroo is inspired by seeds worn by ancient people, who used them for ornamental reasons. Galhotra's usage of ghungroos began with a search for material that could create the effect of "sprawl" and tactile surfacing, much like the way algae or termites cover or "grow" over a surface. She notes that "the process of working with the material was equally important to her as she wanted to witness the process of deconstructing the image" that the ghungroos covered. As the metallic bells "sprawl" and colonise the surface, they replace the "original" image with their glittery presence. Though they are sonorous and pleasant, ghungroos also resonate with the vulgarity and conspicuous consumption – one of the ways in which we attempt to announce our "arrival" at greater wealth and power.

In this age of Anthropocene, or "The Age of Man," Galhotra notes that we are the ones responsible for transforming the planet, suffocating a breathing living surface under multiple layers of concrete, metal, and toxic chemicals. In her use of debris – piles of dusty, broken, intentionally unaesthetic construction debris; bits of plastic, copper and aluminium she obtained from scrap dealers, encased in glass cubes (thus "museumised," they are elevated to art or ethnographic object value); a singular, golden rock that one can pick up and examine as an object of desire – she interrogates the modern urban obsession with tearing down the old in order to erect the shiny and new. Whilst cities like New York are exceedingly good at eliding destruction – hiding their debris by disguising construction sites behind painted canvas backdrops portraying dreamscapes of the buildings that will emerge from the chrysalis of the façade – Galhotra laughingly tells me that Delhites often do little to cover up the brokenness and destruction that goes into constructing their modernity. "Delhi is always breaking and making...it is constant," she says. There is such a push to build, to deconstruct and reconstruct that greenbelts and parks are being razed over to create new residential and commercial spaces; because there is economic and political pressure, little of existing precautions and plans to make the city habitable are being paid attention to. And with each layer of concrete, the ecosystem is indelibly changed.

The city attempts to hide the "brokenness" that shadows the gleaming and modern portion by carting destroyed material, along with the dust and toxic matter, into ghettos and slums, where the inhabitants have little political power. Yet, this debris, though it is "disappeared," much like the poor and the disenfranchised of Delhi, returns: the wind blows particulate material back to the city that attempted to get rid of it.



MANTHAN / film duration 10:44 mins /2015

And because Delhi's gleaming new skyscrapers – those structures that announce a city's arrival into global modernity – are being built on a known seismic zone, with little precaution and attention to incorporating earthquake safety – she fears that to dust it will return. Thus, for Galhotra, debris – whether disguised by an alluring, cinematic dreamscape or nakedly visible – is evidence of climate change and the age of Anthropocene; it is indicative of happy-go-lucky, oblivious capitalism, its attendant, insatiable desire to consume.

Among Galhotra's works for this exhibition, there are many stark elements of lost ethereal beauty among all the reminders of destruction. Among them, the most unsettling might be her work

recording the high levels of faecal matter and the chemical pollutants in rivers in India. In particular the poisoning of the river Yamuna moved Galhotra to focus her attention to the daily effects that the water – from which Delhi gets its supply – will have on the health of the city's inhabitants. In order to help observers visualise the dire reality, the film **MANTHAN** is shown in this exhibition. First, we see sediment and sludge from the river being churned by four people dressed in rubber



REMAINS / resin, fabric and metal / 8x5.5x94 in / 2015-16

rectangular forms; the forms remind us of steel beams essential for the construction of reinforced concrete, which form the foundational structure of all skyscrapers. These are the very building blocks that hold up our dreams for an indestructible, concrete future – structures that help us forget mortality and decay. Yet, because these “beams” are made of synthetic resin – and translucent – they give us a view into the destruction that is inherent in our processes of manufacturing immortality – the poisonous, the death, the immensity of grieving. Galhotra notes that although much has been done to curb the worst offences, the river continues to be heavily polluted; 1% of this polluted water goes into the city’s municipal system to meet its inhabitants’ daily needs, and this same water is used to irrigate the surrounding farms – and thereby, the city’s food supply, and its inhabitants’ bodies are intimately tied to the poisonous waste poured into the water. She says, resignedly, “After all, whether we die ‘clean’ or ‘dirty,’ we die. In one death, the river can accept our body, and our life will become a part of that flow of water. But the death we meet after we have wreaked destruction and poison is one that the river water will never be able to absorb or cleanse.

wetsuits and protective gear. They dip the shroud in the water, in an action that mimics the way people have washed clothes in the river since time immemorial. One of two white cloths is dipped into the river at a point before raw sewage, before biological and chemical wastes are dumped into the Yamuna River; the second is “washed” in a portion of the river after sewage is dumped in. One can see – so clearly – which is the “uncontaminated” and which the “contaminated” or “polluted” cloth. MANTHAN, thus, provides a visceral, disturbing, and unforgettable visualisation of the water that supplies Delhi.

Galhotra encased these shroud-like cloths that were “washed” in the Yamuna within jewel-green resin

To create a tactile sense of our interdependency to organic and inorganic matter, she created an interactive sound wall in which multiple sounds can be triggered on touch at multiple points. These sounds signal the different “energies” that



BREATH BY BREATH / digital print on archival paper / 18x36 in / 2016-17
present condition.

In the work BREATH BY BREATH, Galhotra collected air from different parts of the Delhi; it is an ironic wink that mocks consumer practices. She notes that people are resorting to purchasing oxygen masks in order to get a breath of fresh air, at times paying as much as \$115 on the Internet retail site Amazon.com or buying air purifiers for their homes. Consumer practices that led to poisonous air actually means that we are now trapped into believing that only further consumerism will save us. Clearly, environmental degradation and air pollution only further existing social hierarchies; only the “haves” will be able to afford such luxury. Galhotra protests this impossible situation where the ordinary inhabitant of the city cannot access the right to clean air. To bear witness, and freeze time itself as a record of this catastrophe, Galhotra collects the air of the city surrounding her.

move and motivate us, connecting our own energies to that of other living and non-living beings. She notes, “It is said that energy is like a boomerang, what you send out into the world is what is reflected back towards you.” Because each living and non-living being is composed of a vast network of atoms, as well as spaces between the matter within each atom, these spaces literally resonate when moved by sound and other energy waves. The work will create a new symphony out of the incomprehensible cacophony we often hear. At times, the sounds will come together to create a symphony. Together, both the cacophony and the symphony create an atmospheric reference to our

Given that we face something as vast as environmental collapse, artist and engineer Natalie Jeremijenko points out that we experience “a crisis of agency – we don’t know what to do as individuals⁷.” But Eleanor Heartney suggests that because of its “tendency toward metaphor and verbal/visual play, its resistance to received ideas and its willingness to colonize new areas of knowledge,” art can have an important part in persuading “us to think differently about our relationship to the environment.”⁸ People need “personal stories, with implications and solutions rather than only facts

to become pro-active,” contends Jill Scott.⁹ She believes that artistic practices allow us to play with “new forms of communication,” which “can become a viable interpretative catalyst for scientific debate.” Scott explains that visual semiotics – or the “analysis of the ways visual images communicate or interpret a message and the associated psychologies, signs and patterns of symbolism” is an essential part of art school training; it means that artists are – if they fully utilise the arsenal of psychological and aesthetic tools available to them – masters at analysing “behaviour and how it changes, including collective “grass roots” actions...bringing together aesthetic form and content within the context of everyday reality.”¹⁰

Scott argues, further, that often, the public “does not benefit from the dissemination of facts and graphs about disaster – these often cause the general public to become less pro-active” because they are overwhelmed.¹¹ Whilst the scientific community may believe that slamming people “with horror stories—the collapse of the Gulf Stream, unprecedented glacial melt, desertification or mass extinction” will help change their behaviours; instead, the “sheer information overload” and the accompanying feeling that it is impossible to address such a massive cascade of interlinked problems “increases...denial.”¹² She notes that this reaction explains why people then “seek scapegoats” to blame, “deliberately engage in wasteful behaviour like trashing the streets during a parade...[or] even totally shut down” because the problems seem too complex and too big for them to handle.¹³ Because art is able to create a dialogue beyond the newspaper’s headline of the day and the screaming urgency of the latest report, it can help us – beyond our class, race, and caste divides – to contemplate the ways in which our understanding of beauty, and even our ways of dreaming of liberation are affected by such challenges.

Galhotra’s practice as an artist is deeply committed to engaging with the question of what one can do – as an artist, as a product of the modern Indian education system who has been taught to comprehend scientific facts and figures, and as a human being concerned with the impact of poisons that daily enter the bodies of the inhabitants of mega-cities like Delhi. She is concerned with the lack of knowledge available to the poor and marginalised of these cities who are the most affected by the by-products of capitalist modernity – like Flint, Michigan’s residents, who have been drinking water with highly toxic levels of lead for decades, Delhi’s residents, too have been at the mercy of their municipal water. Her work focuses on a localised issue. However, it is also a story that is globally relevant, interconnecting communities that would have otherwise struggled alone, and often in obscurity. Without threads of social media sites that grassroots activism now depend on to disseminate news of the uninhabitable conditions in which they are forced to live, and to publicise the whitewashing efforts of industry and local governments, most of them would have, without a doubt, been “disappeared” from consciousness.

Ultimately, Galhotra’s work is not reaching for a utopian return to a Romantic period, where idealised forms of nature were valourised in art. Rather, her dark optimism employs the philosophy first outlined by Timothy Morton in *Ecology Without Nature*, where he argues that nostalgia for “unspoilt” and idealised nature is more of an obstacle, rather than a catalyst for effective environmental activism. Galhotra, then, leaves us to contemplate, “Who owns the Earth” and what is our individual and collective responsibility, in the face of human-engineered destruction?

M. Neelika Jayawardane is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego, and an Honorary Research Associate at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA), University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa). She is a founding member of the online magazine, *Africa is a Country*, where she was a senior editor and contributor from 2010-2016. Her writing is featured in *Transitions*, *Contemporary*, *Al Jazeera English*, *Art South Africa*, *Contemporary Practices: Visual Art from the Middle East*, and *Research in African Literatures*. She writes about and collaborates with visual artists.

¹Davis, Heather and Turpin, Etienne. “Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction.” *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press, 2015. 3-29.

²Ibid, 11.

³Lack, Jessica. “Can art help us understand environmental disaster?” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/21/art-environmental-disaster-oil>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

⁴Heartney, Eleanor. “Art for the Anthropocene Era.” *Art in America*. 06 FEB. 2014. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/art-for-the-anthropocene-era/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

⁵Davis, Heather. “The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP 21.” *SFAQ/ NYAQ/ LXAQ: International Art and Culture*. <http://sfaq.us/2016/03/the-land-and-water-and-air-that-we-are-some-thoughts-on-cop-21/>. Accessed 26 Feb. 2017.

⁶Van den Boogaard, Oscar. “In Search of Stanley Brouwn: The Man Who Wishes to Remain Invisible.” *Frieze blog*. 12 Mar 2014. <https://frieze.com/article/search-stanley-brouwn>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

⁷Heartney, Eleanor. “Art for the Anthropocene Era.” *Art in America*. 06 FEB. 2014. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/art-for-the-anthropocene-era/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

⁸Ibid. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

⁹Scott, Jill and Kueffer, Christoph. “Environmental Justice, ‘Collapse’ and the Question of Evidence: What Can the Arts Contribute? A Dialogue.” *Environmental Justice and the Arts*, Vol. 3, 2015. 3.

¹⁰Ibid. 4-5.

¹¹Scott, Jill and Kueffer, Christoph. “Environmental Justice, ‘Collapse’ and the Question of Evidence: What Can the Arts Contribute? A Dialogue.” *Environmental Justice and the Arts*, Vol. 3, 2015.

¹²Ibid. 5.

¹³Ibid. 5.