

Dynamic of climate change

Puja Gupta, Dec 07, 2016, DHSBN Deccan Herald, New Dehli

Video essay

Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's video essay *Deep Weather* displays a particular dynamic of climate change. Specifically, the video draws the connection between the relentless unearthing of heavy tar sands in Northern Canada and the mud embankments built by Bangladeshi communities to protect their Delta villages against the rising sea — two remote and simultaneously occurring scenes connected through the atmospheric chemistry.

“What it's saying is that Earth is a closed, responsive system. There is the fluid circulation between what humans do and how nature responds. But the response is not always local. Through the massive intervention in a local ecosystem an unbalance may be happening way over there, at the other side of the world. The title refers to deep time – geological time. To bring fossil deposits to light forces us to think in deep time,” says Biemann.

As part of the photo festival *Habitat Photosphere* presented by Pro Helvetia - Swiss Arts Council, *Deep Weather* explores the devastating aerial images of the scarred landscape of the Canadian tar sands giving a sense of the vast scale of the damage: ashen contours, littered with the occasional digger, stretch over an area the size of England.

“First, based on a field trip to Bangladesh, a research was conducted on the various measures Bangladesh is undertaking to respond to the rising sea due to the melting Himalayan ice fields and extreme weather events. I visited numerous sites and spoke with hydro-engineers and marine and coastal ecologists,” she says.

On the other hand, she was invited to a field trip to the Alberta tar sands by the University of Edmonton to visit the tar sands and explore the ways in which they affect the boreal forests and the indigenous communities who live there. “Their land is devastated in a lasting way since these mossy boreal forests, as important for the planetary climate as the Amazon, cannot be reforested after the extraction activities have ended. The brunt of the massive intervention in the planetary ecology will be carried by poor communities in the Southern deltas.”

Talking about the idea of filming this essay, Biemann tells *Metrolife*, “It is a result of a small note I read in an NGO report by a trainee who mentioned that there were thousands of people building these embankments by hand who are mostly women.

When reading the note, I had the entire image in front of my eyes and did everything to find such a scene. Neither my translator nor the drivers cared to take me so far out into the delta but the image in my head was driving my motivation. After hours on a speed boat into the amphibian territories of the delta we found an entire village mobilised to build this huge life-saving infrastructure.”

Biemann says that the tar sands which are corporate classified territory were impossible to access for an independent video artist like her. “The only way to get a glimpse of the black tar fields is by renting a helicopter and flying above 1,000 meters. Below that height, the oil

corporation may order you to come down, above it is free sky," she notes.

But why did Biemann, who is also an artist and a writer, choose video as a medium to communicate? "The video essay is my preferred genre because it allows for an experimental, creative and highly subjective approach to the subject. It contains documentary footage but the voice-over is an intense whispering voice speaking in poetic rhythms."

She adds, "I was looking for artistic means that would reach the social imaginary, not just the rational mind. The voice merges with the winds that drive greenhouse gases around the planet. We have a lot of data and diagrams on climate change available to us, but to reach the collective imaginary, a more sensorial, more visceral approach is needed." Deep Weather was made in 2013, and has travelled in Europe at the Biennial of Venice and Montreal, and in other places in Canada and US. "The video has a poignant message. My hope is that at this festival it will be able to reach many people and that the Indian audience is open and receptive to its experimental style," says Biemann.

Deep Weather can be viewed till December 31, at the Open Palm Court, India Habitat Centre.