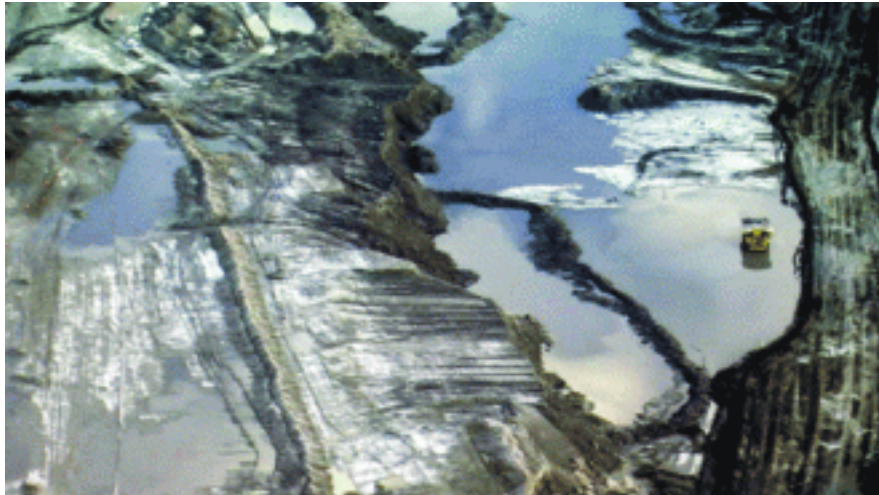


GRAND VISION OF HUMANITY

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Deep Weather, a video essay by Swiss writer and artist Ursula Biemann, shows the environmental impact of human activities in the most poignant manner. She views ecology as an inter-connected system.

By Saritha Saraswathy Balan

After the oil peak, there are dirtier, remote and deeper layers of carbon resources whose rampant misuse and tampering is impacting our environs on a much bigger scale. A video essay doing the rounds reveals the extent of damage probably for the first time. The aerial recording of the devastated crust of Alberta focusses on dark lubricant geology. Aggressive mining and steam processing of the tar-sands are impinging on environmental and human rights as they devastate territories.

Climate change, exasperated by projects such as the Canadian tar sands, puts the life of large world populations in danger. Melting Himalayan ice fields, rising planetary sea levels and extreme weather events increasingly impose an amphibian lifestyle on the Bangladeshi population. Gigantic efforts are made by the community to build protective mud embankments. Hands-on, machine-less work by thousands is what climate change will mean for most people in the deltas of the global south. These are the measures taken by populations who progressively have to live on water when large parts of Bangladesh will be submerged and water is declared the territory of citizenship.

Engaging with the potential ecology of oil, ice and water, Ursula Biemann interweaves vast cinematic landscapes with documentary footage to narrate a changing planetary reality. An artist, writer and video essayist based in Zurich, her artistic practice is strongly research-oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations. Her thought-provoking video essay, *Deep Weather*, is on at the Habitat Centre.

She argues there is a need for an immediate concern about the condition of the earth against the backdrop of climate change and eco-crisis, the impact of which we haven't even started to realise. "My interest in a globalising world shifted to global ecology. From the beginning of the 70s, art began to focus on ecology but approached it mostly in local eco-systems. But with climate change, I believe we have to study ways to express the planetary connectivity of all eco-systems and understand their dynamic. This is what I am most interested in now," she says.

So how effectively can the impact of ecological devastation across the globe be communicated through this video? "I feel more important is to communicate what is not just happening in the Canadian boreal woods but something which is intimately connected with our existence. Climate change is difficult to represent because it is an invisible dynamic, all we ever see are its footprints. The causes of local disruptions are diffused and difficult to locate. The consequences, on the other hand, are hard and specific. The times ask for a recalibration of our senses that take such remote causality into consideration," she says.

Asked why she chose the cinematic path to send out her message, considering green films are now a genre, she says, "The script in *Deep Weather* is infused with a poetic science-fictional narrative enhanced by the voice, whispered into wind like a personification of the atmosphere itself. It resonates with the aerial video footage, activating an atmospheric time-space beyond the immediate physical and political reality of what is in front of the camera."

The most shocking among what she has come across during her travel was the extractive enterprises that have left the biggest and most profound scars and contaminations in forests both in the Amazon and Northern Canada where she has done field work recently. The devastation affects the living and migrating space of so many species, including humans, as well as the biosphere as a whole.

So how can art be used as a purveyor of truth? "Art can make surprising and perhaps irrational propositions in this regard. We increasingly live in a visual world. There is little separation between reality and the visual world. To intervene with a visual tool, such as video, is effectively intervening in the reality of the world. Video is world-making, it is a geomorphic practice," she adds.

Deep Weather tries to create a landscape where background and foreground are fluctuating, unstable, creative, and contaminating, rather than fixed and stable. It makes you enter amphibian territories. The video sets out to explore this geomorphic dimension by examining, reframing and renegotiating what counts as active subject and passive landscape or nature. "This is how art can help reshape the relationship we have with the natural world," she says.

For her, the roles of a writer and artist are complementary. "Art and poetry can access the collective imaginary more powerfully. But there is a need to theorise how visual art can embrace the challenges of environmental degradation and work together with natural science and the humanities. I am interested in this dialogue as well," she says.