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## Guest Blog: Local perspectives on a global phenomenon & global changes in local places (Part III)

10th January 2019



In the final blog of a three part series contemporary artist and researcher Sonia Mehra Chawla writes about the research she undertook in Aberdeen in June 2018 to inform an upcoming residency with Edinburgh Printmakers.

**Local perspectives on a global phenomenon & global changes in local places – Talking about ‘scales’ and the urgency of the contemporary moment**

### ***Location and its influence on my artistic inquiry***

My artistic practice is concerned with notions of selfhood, nature, ecology, conservation and sustainability. My *art* spans many other disciplines and areas, and I often find myself questioning, dissecting and re-imagining spaces that exist at the interface between art and science, nature and culture, production and perception, self and the other. My work over the past few years has often been a result of sustained collaborations with Scientific and Research Institutions, Non Profit and Non-Governmental Organizations and Trusts in India, as well as interactions with fishing, farming and agricultural communities, indigenous people, and tribal communities of rural and semi-urban regions of India.

In my opinion, local dynamics are worth worrying about, and localities can make a difference. Many of the individual phenomena that underlie environmental processes such as population dynamics, economic activities and resource use, for instance, arise at a local scale.

As a cultural practitioner and researcher it is imperative for me to consider how local places contribute to global changes, what drives those changes, how do these contributions change over time, how and where scale matters, what are the interactions between macro-structures and micro-agencies, and how efforts at mitigation and adaptation can be locally initiated and adopted.

These are also some of the vital questions that I attempt to address, probe and analyse through my research.



Exhibition view of Sonia Mehra Chawla's film 'Altered Growth: Inner Life of the Transformed', from 'The (Un) Divided Mind, International Art+ Science Residency at Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi. (2018) Image credit: Khoj International Artists' Association, New Delhi.

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### ***Interconnected processes & locale specific answers to global changes in climate***

Climate change and agriculture are interrelated processes. The current and ongoing phase of my artistic practice marks a close engagement with the present and future of India's agriculture, with a focus on the impacts of climate change and salinity on rice ecosystems in coastal regions of India. This includes research on both indigenous and transgenic rice in India, climate adaptation and mitigation, and food and nutrition security.

Rice is one the most consumed foods on Earth. It is a staple in many countries including India where a large part of the population depends on the grain for sustenance. In fact, more than 90% of rice is produced and consumed in Asia. An enormous portion of rice production is lost to various abiotic stresses such as drought, flood, and salinity, and biotic stresses such as diseases and pests. In addition, changes in global climate are likely to make things vastly complicated for rice production in the future.

Essentially, fragility resulting from adverse environmental conditions linked to climate change, fundamentally alters the linkages between agriculture and nutrition outcomes. When margins are slender, vulnerability to adverse climate is magnified. Sometimes this is a chronic and steadily worsening process that encourages migration with its own consequences, or even worse consequences with catastrophic climate events. Food shocks are a part of this. Then again, without the right kind of sustenance and security, climate refugees, people who are internally displaced today may become asylum seekers, refugees, or international migrants in the future.

Agriculture and rural development, on a local scale can make a strong contribution to meeting the global challenge of addressing large movements of refugees and migrants.

Again, if I look at my research on the *impact of climate change on rice production* and increasing sensitivity of rice to salinization, and because salinity tolerance in plants is a multi-genic trait, (which means that a single gene cannot confer the ability to be saline tolerant) there isn't a single answer to the problem. The key idea then, is to raise a crop for locale specific as well as regional areas, which would provide locale specific answers to global changes in climate.

Work from Sonia Mehra Chawla's 'Scapelands' series. Medium: Photopolymer etchings on archival paper. Printed in the UK in collaboration with London Print Studio. The research, production and International Residency at London Print Studio in 2014-15 was supported by British Council India and Charles Wallace India Trust. Image credit: British Council India.

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### ***A living vicious cycle of depredation***

I have been exploring the fragile and endangered coastal and mangrove ecosystems along India's Coromandel and Malabar coasts for over half a decade. The mangroves in India are over exploited and are declining and degrading rapidly. India has already lost over forty percent of its mangroves during the last century. The Mangroves around coastal mega-cities in India like Mumbai for example, form a fragile ecosystem, and time and again, the rains in Mumbai and the disaster that follows has demonstrated the consequence of tampering with the

ecology of these sensitive ecosystems.

The mangroves provide a preview of the challenges ahead for ecosystems and biodiversity hotspots across the planet. 'Scapelands' and 'Critical Membrane' are extensive series of works that I created between 2012 and 2018 on coastal and mangrove ecosystems of India. While 'Scapelands' explores the rich mangrove biodiversity of India, 'Critical Membrane' speaks about vast landscapes of loss, exploring past histories, politics, economics of consumption, and livelihoods and systems in flux. Documented extensively in degraded mangrove belts across India, these decaying ecosystems speak volumes about a living vicious cycle of depredation that is the tale of 21st century globalization.



Details from Sonia Mehra Chawla's site specific installation 'Residue' at Yinchuan Biennale 2016. Image credit: Yinchuan Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan, China.

Through my work I hope to explore the relationship between the presented history and the contemporary moment and address such questions as: What does the current prominence of these works say about this moment in India's history and society? How do the struggles of the past resonate with the protests of the present? Do these works represent a watershed year or a seminal moment in the representation of the nation's history and culture? If so, what is the larger significance of these works and this historical moment?

***A human centred approach - Connecting global, national and local standpoints***

India is a supporter of climate justice. There is an urgent need to respect and protect human rights, and the rights of the most vulnerable while supporting the right to development, where the burden of climate change is fairly allocated and dispensed. Global warming is after all, not just environmental in nature, it is a political, social and ethical issue as well, which connects the local to the global, and developing nations to the developed nations of the world.

What we require most in a time of crisis is a human-centred approach.

There is an urgent need for a combined effort in mitigation and adaptation. Historical responsibilities matter and those who have greatest responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions and maximum capacity to act, must act in more meaningful ways to completely cut emissions.

Adapting to climate change is both a challenge and an opportunity. We need a cultural shift in our value-systems and ambitions to build a sustainable future block-by-block. There is an urgency to explore more inclusive, more flexible and more effective approaches to social transformation. A cultural shift provides a space for collective, improvisational and reflective modes of acting on, and thinking about a world of differentiated, multiple and uncertain futures, creating an emotional engagement and understanding needed to motivate meaningful change.

### ***The artistic project (2018-2020)***

I was invited to undertake the research arm of an artistic project with Edinburgh Printmakers in Aberdeen in June 2018. This research will inform an intensive print residency at Edinburgh Printmakers in spring 2019, and the outputs from this residency will be presented as part of a solo exhibition at Edinburgh Printmakers beautiful new home at Castle Mill in 2020.

Edinburgh Printmakers will transform the former North British Rubber Company HQ- Castle Mills, into a vibrant new creative hub opening to the public in 2019.

### ***Choosing focus areas***

I hope this artistic project will serve as a platform and starting point for dialogue and conversations around some of the significant and pressing issues of our time such as the future of energy, the future of our oceans and marine life, society's dependence on fossil fuels, just transitions, the global challenges of energy transitions, carbon reduction goals, as well as the human dimension of crisis.

### ***End of Part III***

**This is the third blog of a three part series. Read [Part I](#) and [Part II](#).**

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**Sonia Mehra Chawla** is a contemporary Indian artist and researcher. She completed a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from College of Art, New Delhi in 2004-05. Her artistic practice explores notions of selfhood, nature, ecology, and sustainability. Sonia works in a variety of media including photography, printmaking, drawing, painting and video.

Sonia was a British Council India & Charles Wallace Scholar to the United Kingdom in 2014-15, for research in printmaking, and is currently the recipient of an International 'Art+Science' Grant Award instituted by Khoj International Artists' Association India & the Wellcome Trust UK/DBT Alliance for 2017-18. She has recently been awarded a six-month Fellowship from the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Germany for the Art, Science and Business Program. Her works have been exhibited at the Institut Fur Auslandsbeziehungen, Germany (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations), Tate Modern, London, Essl Museum of Contemporary Art, Austria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan, China, Goethe Institut, Mumbai, India, CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, India, ET4U Contemporary Visual Art Projects, Denmark, and Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi, India.

Further reading and information:

The artists' official website: <http://soniamehrachawla.in/>

Edinburgh Printmakers: <https://www.edinburghprintmakers.co.uk/>

[On Turning Toward: 'Critical Membrane' by Sonia Mehra Chawla](#), Heather Davis looks at the work of Sonia Mehra Chawla, as part of her look into Four Figures of Climate Change, July 2017

<http://theo-westenberger.tumblr.com/post/162458052219/on-turning-toward-critical-membrane-by-sonia>

Down To Earth, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>

*'The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable'*, by Amitav Ghosh. Published by Penquin India.

*'Everybody Loves a Good Drought'*, by P.Sainath. Published by Penquin India.

*'Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics'*, by Timothy Morton. Published by Harvard University Press.

*'Soil, Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an age of Climate Crisis'* by Vandana Shiva. Published by Penguin Random House.

*'Water Wars'*, by Vandana Shiva.

*'From Green to Evergreen Revolution: Indian Agriculture, Performance & Challenges'*, by Prof. M S Swaminathan. Published by Academic Foundation.

*'In Search of Biohappiness: Biodiversity and food, Health and Livelihood security'*, by Prof. M S Swaminathan. Published by World Scientific.

*'Oil Strike North Sea'*, by Mike Shepherd. Published by Luath Press.

*'The Klondykers'*, by Bill Mackie. Published by Birlinn, Edinburgh (2006)

*'Old Torry and Aberdeen Harbour'*, by Rosie Nicol & Particia Newman. Published by Stenlake Publishing Ltd, UK.

I am grateful for conversations and interactions with:

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