

JUST FOLLOW THE SOUND OF THE RIVER...

Eawag, Switzerland

Irene Hediger

What sounds like a *mantra* in Eastern Philosophy has in fact a worldly source in the encounter between the artist Surekha¹ from Bengaluru (India) and the natural scientists (water ecologists) in Switzerland. "*Just follow the sound of the river...*" is the art project Surekha created during her three months residency in the Swiss Federal Institute for Water Research, Eawag, near Zurich, Switzerland.² Developed as part of the Indo-Swiss artists-in-labs Residency Exchange³, Surekha's residency at the Department of Aquatic Ecology introduced her to a range of research activities, including the ecology of alpine streams, the population ecology of aquatic insects, and limnological investigations in the Swiss National Park. While working alongside scientists in a research environment for an extended period of time was new to the artist. However, it was not the first time that Surekha had worked on the subject of water. A previous art project "*focusing the urban rural margins – Jakkur Lake 2008-2011*" includes photography and video-interviews, focused on the Jakkur lake, 15 km outside of Bangalore, where the lake and its surroundings play an important role not only for the ecosystem of the area but also for the rural community around the lake. The work she produced clearly reflects the influence of the scientific and the social coming together as a means to understand the place and value of water.

To understand Surekha's work requires that we explore the process through which she developed her concept and the ideas that materialized in a participative multimedia installation at the end of her residency. On the one hand this is a process that unfolds the poetic, visual and aesthetic qualities of water on a micro and on a macro level, and on the other hand, this is a process that expands the local ecological and social role of water within its global, political and philosophical dimensions. Water here is both a commodity and an element essential for life. During the first weeks at *Eawag*, Surekha learnt about



Surekha, *Just follow the sound of the river*, water samples from different parts of the world, 2011

Surekha, *Just follow the sound of the river*, photographs, 2011



Surekha with water samples.



water ecology through courses, conferences, speaking to the scientists and looking at water and aquatic organisms under the microscope. Zooming into the materiality of water Surekha discovered a new, strikingly beautiful, living world, and was soon captured by the "water-bubbles", air-inclusions in water. She started researching the visual differences of these water-bubbles looking at water samples from different lakes and streams in the area, and samples of tap water, and of warm and cold water. Her findings are gathered and re-interpreted in a large-scale composition of "water-bubbles" from microscopic images. Further elements of "*Just follow the sound of the river...*" were inspired by Surekha's shadowing of scientific fieldwork in the mountains, where she observed the systematic gathering of data (water samples) in specific research sites and monitoring - in this case the basin of the Morteratsch glacier (2020m) and hydro-electric dam stream bank in Graubünden. In a video-essay the artist juxtaposes her gathering of poetic visual material on the aquatic landscape with the scientists gathering of aquatic samples.

Like a river, Surekha's work meanders, finding its way through different landscapes and altitudes, making new branches and by doing so creating new landscapes. Rivers do not know community or boundaries of the countries; their course requires that we view them as a continuous system. A core part of Surekha's work-in-progress was to engage with this systemic understanding of rivers. She asked people from all over the world to send her water samples with an image of the source from where the sample was taken. Over 160 water-samples in flasks and vessels of all kinds and shapes from over 25 countries, together with images and stories about the source of this water have since arrived at Eawag. Arranged during the installation what we saw was clear water, no visible difference

between the samples, differences being narrated by the images and stories of the waters collection or rendered visible by the eye of the microscope.

By taking such a participatory approach, enrolling the scientists, her local community at Eawag as well as friends and colleagues across the world, Surekha's work reminds us of our universal need for water, of its apparent ubiquity, but also the stark variations in quality and amount of water resources around the world. To be able to view, and hence to effect change on a large system, like the global hydrological cycle, takes local actions and a participatory approach.

Exhibiting Surekha's artistic responses to scientific research can open up these discussions with the general public in different cultural contexts. Thus a different perspective is offered about contemporary art, one that questions if scientific metaphors are too literal or art too abstract and allow the public to have a deeper access to the scientific research. Visitors are invited to "think" about art and at the same time "engage with" some of the most current developments and discourses in



Aquatic Research.

Foot notes:

1. www. <http://surekha.info/>
2. Eawag is among the world's leading aquatic research institutes with activities in research, education, consulting and knowledge transfer. It hosts a range of natural and social scientists, permitting a range of research from relatively unperturbed aquatic ecosystems to fully engineered wastewater management systems. Eawag's Department of Aquatic Ecology is currently home for eleven research groups that cover the broad disciplines of ecology and evolution from the individual to the community and ecosystem level. The department emphasizes strong theoretical and empirical research on environmentally relevant issues with broad national and international interest. www.eawag.ch
3. Initiated in 2003, the Swiss artists-in-labs program still provides a framework for artists to be deeply immersed into very specific scientific research environments (life science, physics, computing or neuroscience). Here artists can investigate their position between science and society. In fact, through interactions both artists and scientists can compare the thematic correlations and differences between their fields of work and benefit from the constructive dynamics of mutual inspiration. The main aim of this national and international exchange program is to generate a free flow of ideas and expertise, based on an equal partnership, the inspiring nature of curiosity and the shared goal of learning from each other's field of knowledge and points of view. The Indo-Swiss Residency Exchange 2011/2012 of Swiss aile is realized in close collaboration with the Arts Council Pro Helvetia New Delhi/Zurich and the Swiss Embassy. www.artistsinlabs.ch

Surekha, *Just follow the sound of the river*, installation, 2011