

7-23-2022

Hema Upadhyay: Disrupting the hegemony of the slums, a negative social spiral.

Silvia Márquez Pease
Florida International University, spease@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/art-art-history>



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#), [Art and Design Commons](#), [Art Practice Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [Epistemology Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pease, Silvia Márquez, "Hema Upadhyay: Disrupting the hegemony of the slums, a negative social spiral." (2022). *Department of Art and Art History*. 10.
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/art-art-history/10>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Communication, Architecture + The Arts at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of Art and Art History by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Hema Upadhyay: Disrupting the hegemony of the slums, a negative social spiral.

Silvia Márquez Pease

Mankind seems to go farther and farther into overpopulation and destruction of the world. Populations are growing faster than our sense of responsibility. Urban sprawl is affecting many cities. In India, the urban sprawl, creates what is commonly known as the ‘slum,’ a disperse outgrowth of cities on their peripheries, marked by poverty, run-down housing, and social disorganization. According to reporter Darby Thompson, “in Mumbai [...] a city of 15 million people, almost 60 percent live in slums or in over 2000 “slum pockets” across the city”(WSWS 2019). Slum eradication has been a concern in South Asian cities, however, not much has been done to disrupt the knowledge hegemony of the slums within urban development theories.

Research suggests that slums expand for several reasons that are linked to urban development, economics, and rural-urban migration. Thompson from the WSWS organization notes that:

The Dharavi slum has been tolerated and even encouraged by successive political administrations due to its economic significance. It contains a huge conglomeration of cottage industries and primitive workshops that produce goods for the world market—an estimated 15,000 single-room factories—as well as an expanding industry processing recyclable waste from across Mumbai. The total annual turnover of Dharavi is estimated to be anywhere from US\$650 million to US\$1 billion” (WSWS.org).

The Slums and their house workers of the nearby workshops represent a huge economic impact in the community. These overpopulated, unhealthy, and dangerous slums impede people to enjoy a simple, healthy, normal life. Slums called for poverty and poor conditions that calls for possible eradication, but that is a different topic of future research. My question is, how can artworks disrupt the knowledge hegemony of the slums?

This article presents the theoretical framework that informs my reflections on the hegemony of the slums’ poverty and human conditions, and whether art can disrupt the

hegemony and become a conduit to question Martin Heidegger's notion of Being or *Dasein*. The following pages investigate the work of the Indian artist Hema Upadhyay, and her inspiring protest work offering insights on India's slums and overpopulation in urban areas such as, Dharavi. She depicts the slums as monsters in a continuum circle of human misery and wealth, a negative social spiral that has no end. I posit that the slums, not only destroy the harmony and promise of a good life, but they generate the need for a disruption of the hegemony of poverty and overpopulation, a need for a democratic response. Indeed, Upadhyay's artworks assist in the process of disarticulation of the 'common sense' knowledge on the slums, and the generation of new hegemonies. I explore the interrelations of art and social change assisted by the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

In this context, I argue that instead of negating the conflict of the slums; rather, Upadhyay artworks embrace diversity and conflict in what Mouffe calls an 'agonistic pluralism,' which means confronting the problem without expecting a consensus. Instead, expecting counter hegemonies. In other words, the institutions might understand the challenges of urbanization and how to establish reasonable conditions for a good life if we agonistically confront the issue of the slums. Upadhyay depicts installations of used and raw materials situating them in a museum environment to directly confront the viewer with the problem of the slums.

My next question relates to the urgency of this problem and how art is or can be a venue for change. Martin Heidegger's notion of a sense of urgency towards the recognition of our absence of Being assists with this question. He proposes a human reconnection with *Dasein* which is the fundamental capacity for questioning and revealing *Alethia* which is the truth or "disclosure" or "unconcealedness" (Heidegger 70). Thus, it triggers a realization of the immediate need for a shift in consciousness.

Hema Upadhyay's artwork disrupts the hegemony of the slums.

The work of the Indian artist Hema Upadhyay¹ that consists of photographs, paintings, and mixed-media installations depicts her personal narratives and family history. Her understanding of the world was through the lens of her migration to USA as a young woman, her socioeconomic conditions, and her experiences at the Indian slums. In an interview, Upadhyay speaks not only to the artworld addressing her psychological imprint: “So much chaos in my work actually came from the city,” [...] “When I work in my studio in Mumbai,² there are lots of elements, of decay, of life, of chaos. It’s a double-edged condition when you see development in the making—you see growth but decay” (Artnet *Upadhyay* 2020).

The artist chaotic installation work expresses her concern about people and overpopulation in India, particularly her focus is the dichotomy between construction and deconstruction, progress and decay. But her work not only speaks to us; it ushers us into a sensorium slum of the chaos outside and inside of us. It makes us question our human existence. Hema’s site-specific installation titled “Where the bees suck, there suck I” was inspired by William’s Shakespeare³ song with the same name. It consisted of two piles of a surplus replicas

¹ “Hema Upadhyay was born Hema Hirani in 1972 in Baroda, India, she earned both her BFA and MFA from the University of Baroda in 1995 and 1997, respectively. She went on to exhibit internationally, with solo shows at the MACRO museum in Rome, the Institute of Contemporary art in Brisbane, and the Gallery Nature Morte in New Dehli, among others. Her career was tragically cut short with her murder at the age of 43 at the hands of her estranged husband the artist Chintan Upadhyay on December 11, 2015 in Mumbai, India.” www.artnet.com/artists/hema-upadhyay/ (Accessed 5/13/2020)

² Hema Upadhyay studio was in her flat in Juhu is an upmarket neighborhood of Mumbai. It is most famous for the sprawling Juhu Beach. It is surrounded by the Arabian Sea to the west, Versova to the north, Santacruz and Vile Parle to the east and Khar to the south.

³ Song: “Where the bee sucks, there suck I”
By William Shakespeare (*from The Tempest*)

Where the bee sucks, there suck I:

of the Indian urban slums made with car-scrap, aluminum sheets, and found objects that clearly mapped the urban landscape sprawl struggle in India. The artist's multiple miniaturized chaotic forms contrast the massive steel excavator representing the capitalistic society of the machine age. Upadhyay conceptualizes India as an institution that is blind to the poverty and struggles of the people and disregards the hegemony of human conditions (Figure 1).

Interestingly, Hema Upadhyay's installation title is what Heidegger would describe as a hybridization of poetry and thought. Upadhyay's installation title is almost identical to Shakespeare's song "Where the bee sucks, there suck I," (*from the Tempest*). Conceptually, the artist is referring to Shakespeare's protagonist: Ariel, who is freed, and sings of his oneness, and interconnection with nature and the natural world. This song expresses Ariel's joy, freedom yet interconnectedness between the natural world and mankind. Hema's conceptual work has deeper undertones to find a field of resurrection after the chaos such as to free humanity from the disastrous existence of the negative social spiral; to connect humanity and the natural world; to question the Being and return to the beginning.

We see her work conceptually disrupting the hegemony of the slums, articulating counter hegemonies for the living conditions in India's slums, re-connecting mankind to nature. Thus,

In a cowslip's bell I lie;
 There I couch when owls do cry.
 On the bat's back I do fly
 After summer merrily.
 Merrily, merrily shall I live now
 Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.
www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50655/song-where-the-bee-sucks-there-suck-i.

(Accessed 5/13/2020)

Shakesongs.com/where-the-bee-sucks-there-suck-i/ (Accessed 5/13/2020)

the potential of art to question the Being and reveal through agonistic disruptions that require interpretations is evident. Furthermore, just like Boudrillard⁴ and Heidegger,⁵ who in different ways, condemned modern art as being complicit to the idea of metaphysics and subjective aesthetics in a post-metaphysical approach; I argue, that the installation of Hema Upadhyay “Where the bees suck, there suck I,” is not only post-metaphysics, but it involves science based on unpredictability, logic and poesis.

Agonism, does not reach a consensus but it articulates counter hegemonies.

The term of agonism was defined by many including Hannah Arendt, whose notion of agonism does not conceive antagonism. Despite Arendt’s recognition of human plurality and politics as an exchange and reciprocity among human beings, she does not recognize this plurality at the origin of antagonistic conflicts. Her pluralism is not so different to the one from Jürgen Habermas’s. Both are at the onset of an intersubjective agreement in the public sphere. Neither Arendt nor Habermas acknowledge the ineradicable character of antagonism, or what Lyotard calls the *différend*.

And, so the question arises whether agonism needs antagonism to elucidate how art resists the existing hegemonies and disarticulate societies towards a new thought. Examining Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s vision of the political, it seems as if they recognize the constitutive character of social division, and the impossibility of a reconciliation. Certainly, for

⁴ See pages 170, 174. Boudrillard says that modern art is not thinking. It is nule. He saves a few artists (Warhol, Duchamp, Bacon) that he considers the ‘authentic simulacrum’. Radical art was accepted, after the first time, repetition became banal. Further, Boudrillard’s concept of mood is through irony and poetry.

⁵ See pages 366, 375. Heidegger believed in hermeneutics– the essence of democracy is an opinion (*poesis*)– and placed importance in interpretations and poetics. The world revealed to us through attunement (*aletheia*).

them, conflict and antagonism are not eluded in their agonistic theory. Thus, Mouffe notes that agonism means to recognize “...the ‘hegemonic’ nature of every kind of social order and envisages society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency” (Mouffe 2). To that effect, every order, by the ‘agonistic struggle,’ acknowledges the contingent character of the hegemonic articulations that determine the specific configuration of a society at a given moment.

Artist philosopher Hema Upadhyay has shifted beyond aesthetic representation and formalism to the post metaphysical, to poesis. Heidegger posits that man still does think, because what must be thought about turns away from him. Thus, man does not sufficiently reach out and turns to what is to be thought (Heidegger 374). Furthermore, Heidegger adds that “In order to be capable of thinking, we need to learn it. What is learning? Man learns when he disposes everything he does, so that it answers to whatever addresses him as essential. We learn to think by giving heed to what there is to think about” (Heidegger 370).

Is it learning and thinking enough? When Heidegger presents the question if we have forgotten how to think, he notes that the mathematical, measurable, scientific analytic (i.e., pure logos) thinking is not enough; and only the presence of *poesis* (i.e., logos and mythos) is the way to think. Poesis marks the path towards what Heidegger calls the newly created philosophy. When “Being opens itself out,” the artists philosophers of tomorrow intertwine logic (logos) and mythos along with poetic thought, to reveal the aspects of Being. The art of Hema Upadhyay, whose installation demonstrates logic, science, and philosophical poetry, is the authentic expression of this vision. Considering art and Mouffe’s notion of the agonistic approach, without discarding antagonism, can be an ‘opener,’ to point towards an ‘open region,’ a significant aspect for better human conditions with and within the slums. In thus taking possession of the open

region, it articulates a new hegemony, and sustains it, until another articulation occurs. For Heidegger, “Truth happens only by establishing itself in the strife and the free space opened up by truth itself” (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 186). Hema Upadhyay artwork conceptually interprets the cause of the struggle in the slums, calling for a questioning of the Being. Warning those that, immerse in a capitalistic society, do not see the urgency. Recognizing the connection between art and disruption of the hegemony -through agonistics— shocks and confronts the viewer, questioning the Being, articulates counter hegemonies, and enables alternatives.

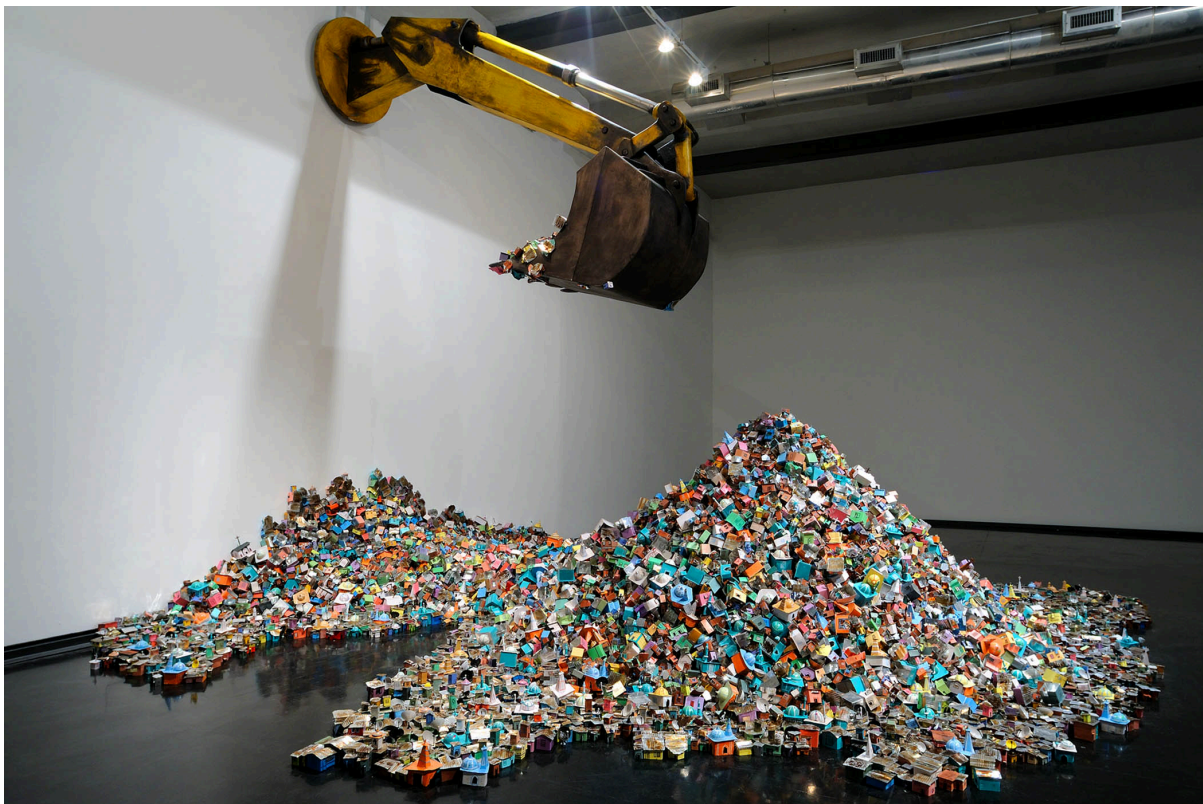


Figure 1. Hema Upadhyay. “Where the bees suck, there suck I,” 2009, Macro Museum, Rome, Italy.



Figure 2. Hema Upadhyay (Indian, 1972-2015). Courtesy Artnet

Works Cited

- Artnet. www.artnet.com/artists/hema-upadhyay/. Accessed 5/13/2020.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. "Populations and Political Society." In *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, 27–51, 154–56. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David Krell. Harper San Francisco, 1993.
- High Powered Expert Committee. 2011. *Report on Indian Urban Infrastructures and Services*. Report, March. icrier.org/pdf/FinalReport-hpec.pdf. Accessed April 23, 2020.
- Hoskote, Ranjit. 2005. *Sudhir Patwardhan: The Complicit Observer*. Mumbai: Sakshi Gallery, Synergy Art Foundation.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso, 2013.
- Yardley, Jim. *The New York Times*. "INDIA'S WAY, In One Slum, Misery, Work, Politics and Hope," 2011. www.nytimes.com/2011/12/29/world/asia/in-indian-slum-misery-work-politics-and-hope.html. Accessed April 23, 2020.
- "Slums." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 10, no. 28, 1975, pp. 1035–1035. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4537241. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

