



## QUESTIONS TO THE YAMUNA RIVER

BY ANDREA CARETTO AND RAFFAELLA SPAGNA

Andrea Caretto / Raffaella Spagna  
9 drawings from the series

**Questions to the Yamuna river, 2012**  
*natural pigments, linen oil, orange essential oil, cotton paper*

The series of 42 drawings *Questions to the Yamuna River* is the result of a performance that took place on the banks of the Yamuna river in New Delhi (India), near the Old Iron Bridge, on April the 8th of 2012. It was made within the artist residency program organized by Khoj – International Artists Associations based in New Delhi.

The residency program was entitled “In Context – Public.Art.Ecology – Food Edition I”. Artists were invited to engage with the theme of food, a particularly relevant issue in a nation like India and in a city like New Delhi, featuring extreme life conditions and rich contrasts.

Our choice was to consider food as a flow of biomass entering the city – one of the biggest Asian metropolises – focusing our attention on the different phases of this cycle of organic matter, in their relationship with the inhabitants of Delhi: the production in the farming fields, the sale in the market places, the bodies of the consumers (both human and nonhuman)

living in the complex urban ecosystem of city, all the way to its digestion and its return to the environment.

The residency began with the exploration of some key locations, the crucial joints of the flow of matter in transformation: farmers’ fields in suburban landscapes, small street vendors, food stores and big wholesale markets, as well as animal farms in public parks, and public sites for the storage and processing of animal feces, for multiple uses.

While exploring the city and searching for the sites of urban agriculture, we stumbled upon the shocking vision of the Yamuna River, a vast watercourse that is currently one of the most polluted rivers in India, and in the stretch crossing New Delhi, one of the most polluted in the world. A community of urban farmers lives on its banks, owing its survival to the overflows that periodically fertilize the soil. Yet, given the extreme levels of water pollution, the floods contaminate the very same fields they fertilize, as well as all the farming products. Concurrently, the Yamuna is worshipped by the Hindu population as a sacred river, for many people even more sacred than the Gange. Its waters receive almost all the sewage wastes of the Indian metropolis, as well as the remains of the people who are cremated, including their personal belongings.

This incredibly complex and contradictory situation has pushed us to confront the river directly, asking him some questions and elaborating a dialogue-interview made of 42 queries,

with the participation of the Indian artists Pratik Sagar and Pratush La, the Spanish artist Alfonso Borragán and some young inhabitants of the riverbanks.

We made use of a divination practice that interprets the form of color droplets that are released on the surface of the water. Hydromancy comprises a variety of divination techniques. Traces of them have been found in Italy, Greece and Asia Minor. The medium that we used is a mixture of natural pigments (New Delhi soil, charcoal, blue pigment used for laundry), grinded and mixed with linen oil and orange essential oil.

The process consisted of a first phase in which the question was raised to the river, followed by the release of some color drops on the water surface. The form of the floating color particles was then captured, after a few seconds, by laying a sheet of paper on the liquid surface, fixing in this way the drawing shaped by the water flow. When dried, the fiber of the paper sheet ripples, preserving in its waves the memory of the contact with the river.

The 42 drawings constitute the answers of the Yamuna River to the questions that we asked. Their interpretation is left to the imagination and intuition of the observer, who is prompted to ponder on both the questions and the answers, while looking for the meaning of the drawing.

Over the years, we have been using a

variety of divination practices originating shapes that can be interpreted, as a way to explore the issue of form. These kinds of ritual acts, historically widespread, investigate the possibility that all forms actually carry meaning and information. As expressions of specific force fields, they are never accidental or neutral.

Questions to the Yamuna River gather the traces of a conversation among beings belonging to different 'species'; it is an attempt to relate directly with other forms of intelligence, by practicing a capacity to listen to the "other".

This work is part of a larger cycle of experiences of knowledge and bond making with a number of watercourses, in different parts of the world (*Ceromancy: 7 questions to the Rhone river*, Francia, 2011; *The Ischiator Conversation*, Rio Ischiator, Vinadio, Italia, 2017).

## 42 QUESTIONS TO THE YAMUNA RIVER

NEW DELHI, 8TH APRIL 2012

- 1) Why all this?
- 2) How do You integrate Your present conditions with Your life experience?
- 3) How is it possible to relate with You nowadays? How shall we do it?
- 4) What kind of living beings do You host?
- 5) Why do people use Your banks as toilet and Your beach for bathing at the same time?
- 6) Why are You so beautiful “in black”?
- 7) (The question has been lost)
- 8) How much time will it take for You the river, to regain Your “pure” state?
- 9) How do You deal with the dispersion of ashes and the human souls?
- 10) Does Your being holy work for Your best? Do You feel confused, being this filthy and holy at the same time?
- 11) Where are the great water spirits that live hidden in You?
- 12) What is the most important thing for You? What is Your most pressing need?
- 13) What do You miss the most?  
13) What is the most disturbing thing for You, among all the substances that are dissolved in Your waters?
- 14) What is the most disturbing thing for You, among all that floats over the surface of your water?
- 15) How do You feel when You receive these few fresh flowers into Your waters?
- 16) How do You communicate?
- 17) Do You like that Your water is used for irrigation? Is it for revenge that You flood with garbage the fields around You?
- 18) What kind of gas is generated in Your waters?
- 19) How would You change the attitude of people towards You? What first step would You suggest?
- 20) How do You feel when Your waters are pumped?
- 21) How do You keep in touch with Your source in the Himalayas?
- 22) What information do You send to the ocean?
- 23) How does Your body change during the monsoons?

24) When someone drinks Your water, how do You perceive that person?

25) Do You communicate any information to the people who drink Your water?

26) How do You affect the body of those who bath in Your water?

27) All the remains of the crematorium are thrown into Your waters. How do You feel about this human choice?

28) Do You think Your water should be available for drinking?

29) Do You feel sick? Do You perceive the people around You as sick?

30) Which of the states that You cross along Your course do You love the most?

31) What is Your relation with the Ganges?

32) What is it happening in the deepest recess of You, at the bottom of the river?

33) How have You changed the shape of Your course over time? What were the main reasons for this change?

34) What do You communicate to the air above and around You?

35) What is Your contribution to the formation of the Ganges delta?

36) How do You relate to dragonflies?

37) Do You think it is necessary or unavoidable that objects are thrown into Your water?

38) What is Your mission for India, for the Indian people?

39) They say that all the sewage of New Delhi is poured into Your waters. Is this sacrifice Your current mission? Do You do it for the sake of all beings?

40) Is it true that You carry more water from sewage than from Your source and tributaries?

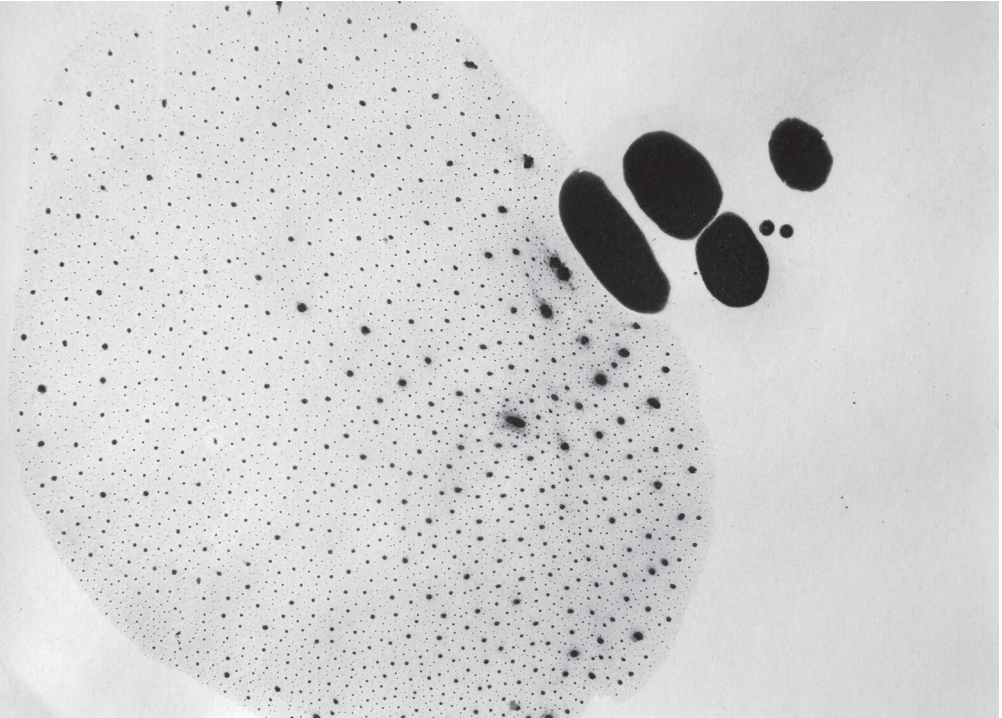
41) What do You think about the financial speculations that were done in the states before New Delhi, limiting the supply of water reaching You for political wish and fulfillment?

42) How can people realize they are hurting You, by throwing waste of all kinds into Your waters?



Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 9 : How do You deal with the dispersion of ashes and the human souls?

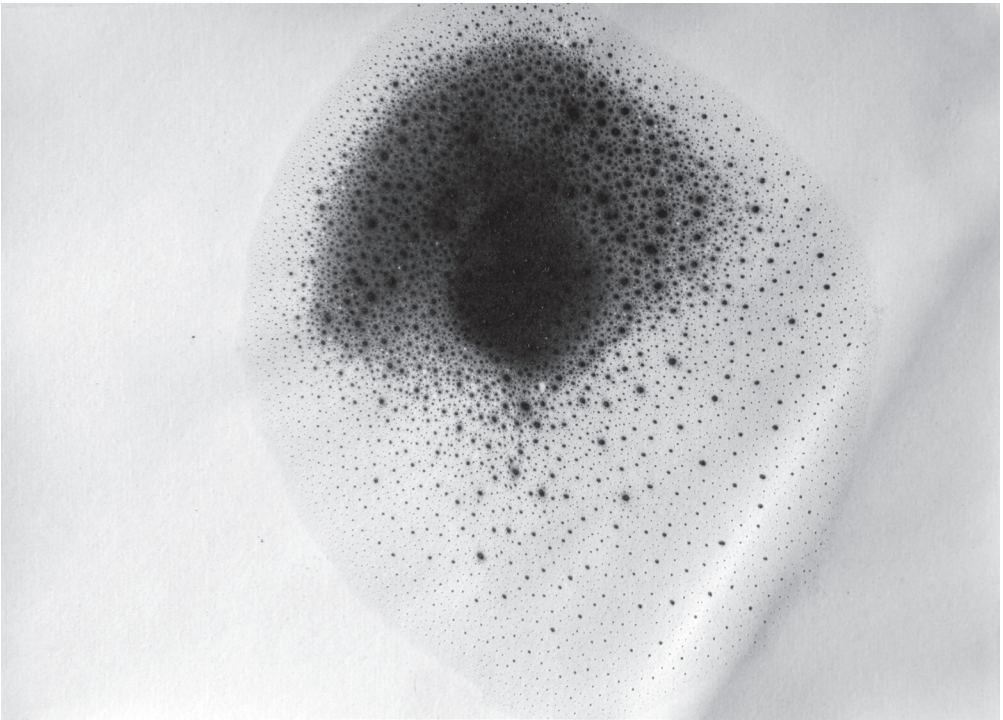
*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*





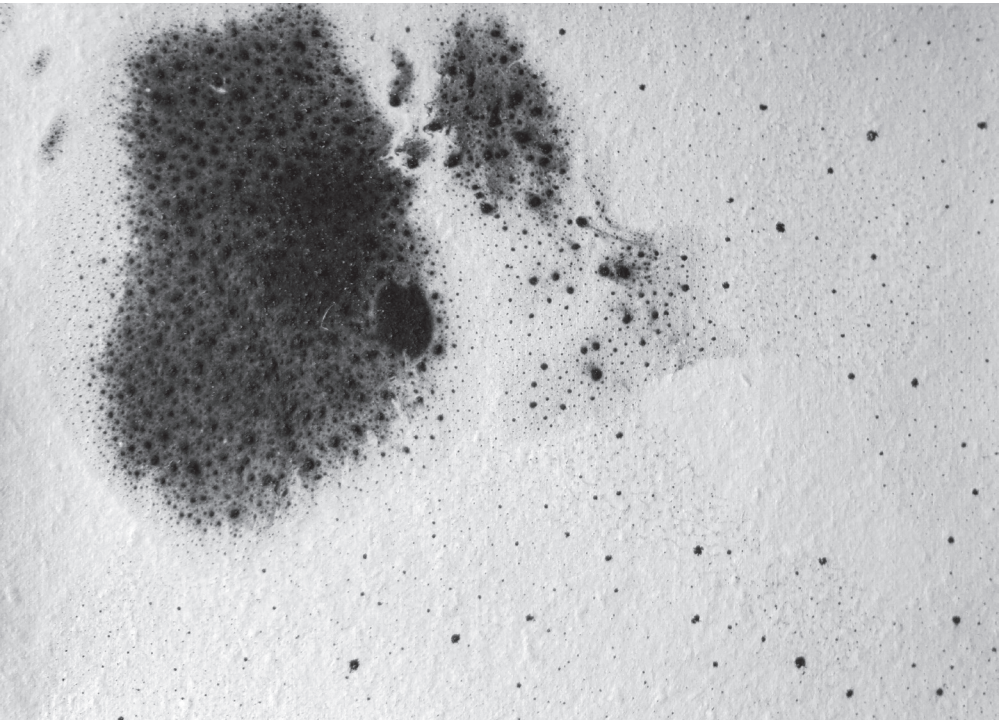
Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 10 : Does Your being holy work for Your best? Do You feel confused, being this filthy and holy at the same time?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



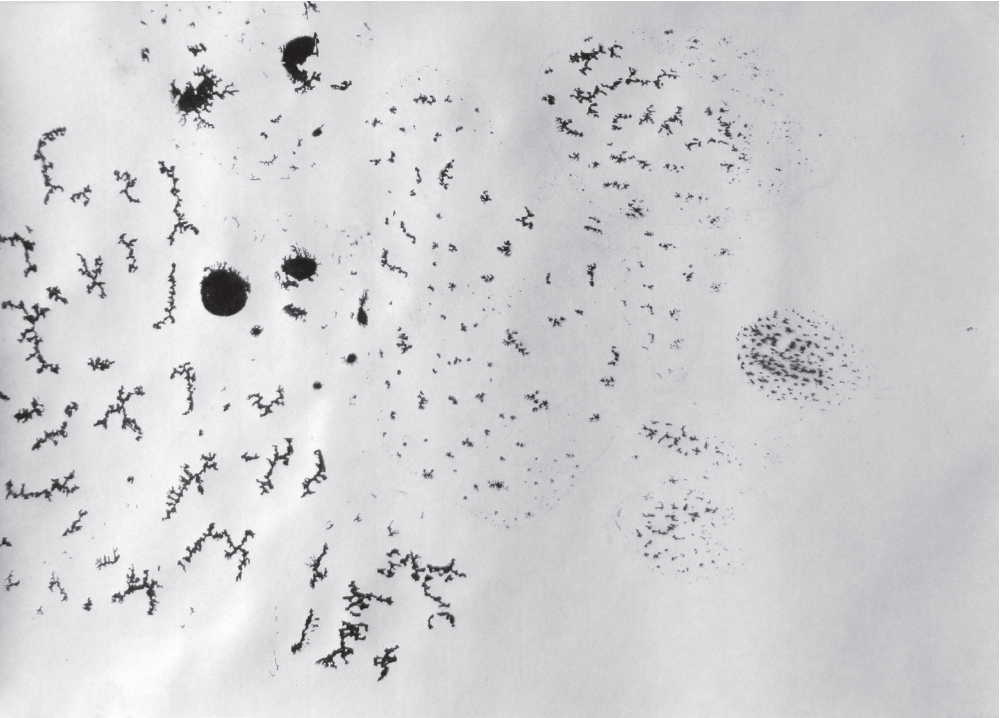
Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 11 : Where are the great water spirits that live hidden in You?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



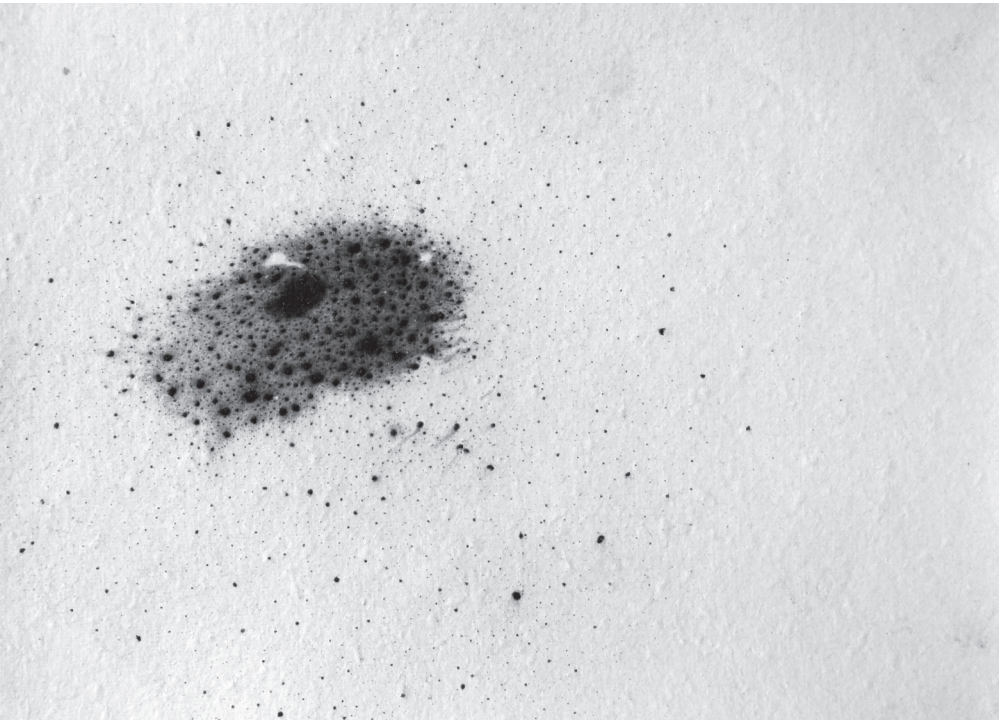
Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 16 : How do You communicate?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm..*



Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 17 : Do You like that Your water is used for irrigation? Is it for revenge that You flood with garbage the fields around You?

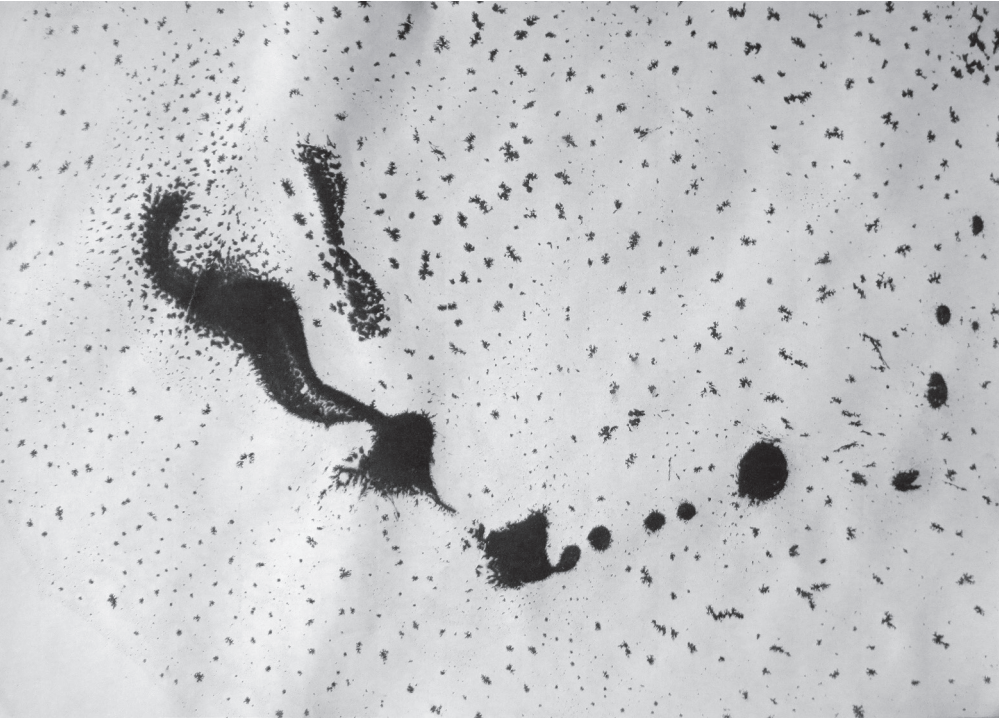
*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*





Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 23 : How does Your body change during the monsoons?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 28 : Do You think Your water should be available for drinking?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 32 : What is it happening in the deepest recess of You, at the bottom of the river?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



Drawing from the series *Questions to the Yamuna river*, 2012 - answer to the question n. 36 :How do You relate to dragonflies?

*Mixture of orange essential oil, linen oil, natural pigment on cotton paper; unique piece, dimension 32 x 45 cm.*



