

(Detail) LOCATION[®], 2002, Raqs interacting with a clock from their multimedia installation.



RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Talking Cure

Independent urbanists, new-media theorists, social psychologists—call them what you will—the New Delhi trio Raqs Media Collective weave together poetic threads from multidisciplinary research into their lecture-performances, web platforms, films and installations.

By HG Masters

artasiapacific
Contemporary Visual Culture

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE, FENG MENGBO, SYMBIOTICA
ROMY ACHITUV, NEW-MEDIA ROUNDTABLE, PAUL PFEIFFER

ISSUE 64 JUL/AUG 2009



"Proximity is not alien to us in India. We are able to talk at some length." Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics, begins the title essay of his book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005) with this self-reflexive observation. This same ruminative tendency characterizes Raqs Media Collective, a New Delhi trio who are regularly cast as new-media artists in the confines of an art world that often doesn't know what to make of their diverse activities examining urban life in South Asia. As documentary filmmakers, social theorists and artists drawing on urbanism, film studies, legal theory, history, the biological sciences, postmodern literary theory, criminology, ancient philosophical and religious literature, new-media technologies, psychology and sociology—to name just a few—Raqs have thrust themselves into debates about the state of contemporary India with examinations of the state's authoritarian use of power over individuals and communities, and their postmodern readings of sacred Hindu texts.

Comprised of Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, all of whom were born in the late 1960s, Raqs have pursued their research and production in the three broadly defined but interrelated fields of documentary filmmaking, collaborative research in urbanism and installations for traditional art galleries and museums. Though Raqs made their debut on the international art scene in 2002 at the prestigious art festival documenta 11, in Kassel, Germany, the collective was formed a decade earlier in New Delhi in 1992, one year after they graduated from the Mass Communications Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi's secular Muslim university, where they studied documentary filmmaking together.

In the 1990s, the members of Raqs scraped by on small freelance productions and writing gigs, assisting filmmaker Pankaj Butalia on a

documentary about Bengali widows living at an ashram in Vrindavan, a pilgrimage site in Uttar Pradesh, before receiving seed money for a documentary on the history of the Andaman Islands for India's Channel 4. Though the film was never made, that was the moment when Bagchi, Narula and Sengupta chose to work under the name Raqs, a Persian, Arabic and Urdu word that describes, in their phrase, "the state that 'whirling dervishes' enter into when they whirl." The name perfectly encapsulates the intense verbosity the collective easily slip into in their own writings, performances or in person.

One of Raqs' experimental documentaries is the 33-minute *In the Eye of the Fish* (1997), which begins with a quote from an episode in the ancient Hindu epic the *Mahābhārata*, in which the archer Arjun wins the hand of a princess by striking the eye of a wooden fish from its reflection in a pool of oil. The cryptic motif of the fish runs throughout the film as footage of fish swimming in bowls is interspersed with scenes of classrooms in India. While the film doesn't reach any explicit conclusion, it illustrates the pressures that students face, contrasting their view of schooling as a means to employment and wealth with their teachers' belief in education as a valuable process in itself.

If there's an implicit dismay lurking in the film, it comes from Raqs' origins in India's Left. The members of Raqs were active in political action groups during their university days in the 1980s—a time that Bagchi describes, in a recent telephone interview with *ArtAsiaPacific*, as characterized by "the exhaustion of Indian nationalism and a renewal being attempted by various authoritarian voices." Aside from an anti-authoritarian bias, the Left was not a staunchly ideological movement. As Bagchi recalls, what the Left shared was "a very open-ended reading of Marx, a disillusionment with the rhetoric of socialism of a certain kind,



a thinking about what capitalism is and a discomfort with nationalism." Ranjit Hoskote, a Mumbai-based critic (and *ArtAsiaPacific* desk editor) explains in a 2004 essay, "Nemo/No-man/Nomad: Collegial Reflections on the Raqs Media Collective," that the effect of this early activism was that Raqs "emerge[d] not disillusioned, but *unillused* . . . They carry with them the impulses of unmasking the dominant discourse, preserving the surprise vital to acts of resistance, and their sense of solidarity with those who suffer injustice."

Raqs' training and early projects produced unconventional documentaries but soon expanded into other forms of research. In 1998, Raqs began discussions with Ravi Vasudevan and Ravi Sundaram, who head New Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), a multidisciplinary research organization formed in 1963 to incorporate ideas from the humanities and the social sciences. The result of those conversations was the avant-garde think-tank Sarai, an independent institute to document and analyze South Asian urban development that opened in 2000 with financial backing from a combination of international nonprofits including the Cultural Economic Development Program of the Netherlands, the Montreal-based Daniel Langlois Foundation and a three-year-long partnership with the multidisciplinary Waag Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam. Located within the CSDS building near Delhi University, Sarai is still run entirely on Raqs' fundraising efforts—among recent and current grantors are the Rockefeller Foundation, the Dutch nonprofit Hivos, and Canada's International Development Research Center—and it houses an archive, a media lab and multipurpose spaces for public workshops, temporary exhibitions, screenings and seminars. Along with publishing an annual volume of essays on a single theme, the *Sarai Reader*, Sarai established

the Cybermohalla Locality Labs in New Delhi—*mohalla* meaning "neighborhood" in Hindi and Urdu and "cyber" reflecting the labs' many collaborative, web-based projects with open-source, Indian-language software. This network of five laboratories studies the city's resettlement communities, dispatching teams of researchers who record conversations with local residents about the neighborhood, collecting printed materials and serving as a gathering place for local writers, artists and historians. What unites Sarai's diverse initiatives is the focus on urban life in New Delhi and the utilization of new media by its citizens—concerns central to Raqs' own projects but which through Sarai are carried out on a vast, metropolis-wide scale.

As producers of texts and ideas on the periphery of academia, Raqs became affiliated with the global contemporary art community largely by happenstance during a time when the art world was increasingly enamored of postmodern cultural theory, urban studies and new media. Following the inclusion of their web-based collaboration with graphic designer Mrityunjay Chatterjee, *Global Village Health Manual* (2000)—which resembles a surrealist collage with statistics and images pulled from around the then-still-nascent world wide web—in a show in New Delhi, Raqs attracted the attention of international curators, including the Walker Art Center's new-media specialist Steve Deitz and documenta 11 artistic director Okwui Enwezor, who was intent on showcasing global art at the European festival. As Bagchi explained to AAP: "What interested them was our project on the relationship between land and law, and the relationship between property and the way that people inhabit property, a relationship in which the digital and the urban were being spoken about through a similar conceptual rubric."

In Kassel, Raqs exhibited *28°28' N/77°15' E: 2001/02: An Installation*



Throughout the city of Kassel, Raqs applied stickers with phrases taken from actual signs in New Delhi: "You are now entering a zero-tolerance zone. Make no trouble here."

on the *Coordinates of Everyday Life in Delhi* (2002), which consisted of three videos projected onto the walls and a satellite image of Delhi projected onto the floor. The videos show trains arriving at New Delhi stations, the construction and demolition of illegal residential settlements within the city, as well as images of the legal codes, master plans and official permits required for building. Throughout the city of Kassel, Raqs applied stickers with phrases taken from actual signs and billboards in New Delhi, translated into English, German and Turkish (as well as in the original Hindi): "Check under your seat. There may be a bomb. Who is the stranger sitting next to you?" and "You are now entering a zero-tolerance zone. Make no trouble here"—alarmist phrases spawned by the urban paranoia that proliferated around the world after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The global mood, a creeping anxiety about the safety of city life, was illustrated in another project at "Emoção Art.ficial" in August 2002 at the Itaú Cultural Centre, São Paulo, Brazil. They presented *Location* (2002), a multi-part installation featuring the sound of modern machines (faxes, modems and phones) layered over a heartbeat, eight computer monitors across which an impassive face progressed from left to right, and a wall-mounted installation of eight back-lit clocks synchronized to the local time in major cities, including São Paulo, New York, New Delhi,

Hong Kong and Tokyo. On these clocks, Raqs replaced the numbers 1 to 11 with an assortment of moods, respectively: anxiety, duty, guilt, indifference, awe, fatigue, nostalgia, ecstasy, fear, panic, remorse and, at the 12-o'clock spot, epiphany. This configuration leads to all sorts of semantic possibilities: "half-past indifference," "a quarter to ecstasy," or "a few minutes before panic." The iconic clockface is now an animation on Raqs' homepage, raqsmediacollective.net.

At Kassel, Raqs had also exhibited the beginnings of another key project, *Open Platform for Unlimited Signification (OPUS)* [opuscommons.net] (2002–), which connects their study of the structure of the modern city with the structure and possibilities of open-source software—modifiable by any user. *OPUS* is an online platform where users can upload their projects, which others then contribute to or modify, producing a collective or communal artwork or project. The platform continues Raqs' interest in the utopian promise, fueled by collaboration, of liberated, unregulated communities on the internet—which have much in common in ethos and structure with the illegal settlements or colonies that figure in Raqs' studies of New Delhi.

Raqs connect cyberspace with ancient literature, the architecture of the world wide web to unplanned urban communities in their credo for collective creativity, "The Concise Lexicon of/for the Digital Commons" (2002). One entry in this alphabetical list of terms in particular stands out as key for Raqs' later projects. Raqs use "recension" (literally, a revised text) to describe open-source projects modified and re-modified by other users, defining it as: "A re-telling, a word taken to signify the simultaneous existence of different versions of a narrative within oral, and from now onwards, digital cultures." Raqs' definition is key to how they understand their subjects—whether it is html code, lines of epic



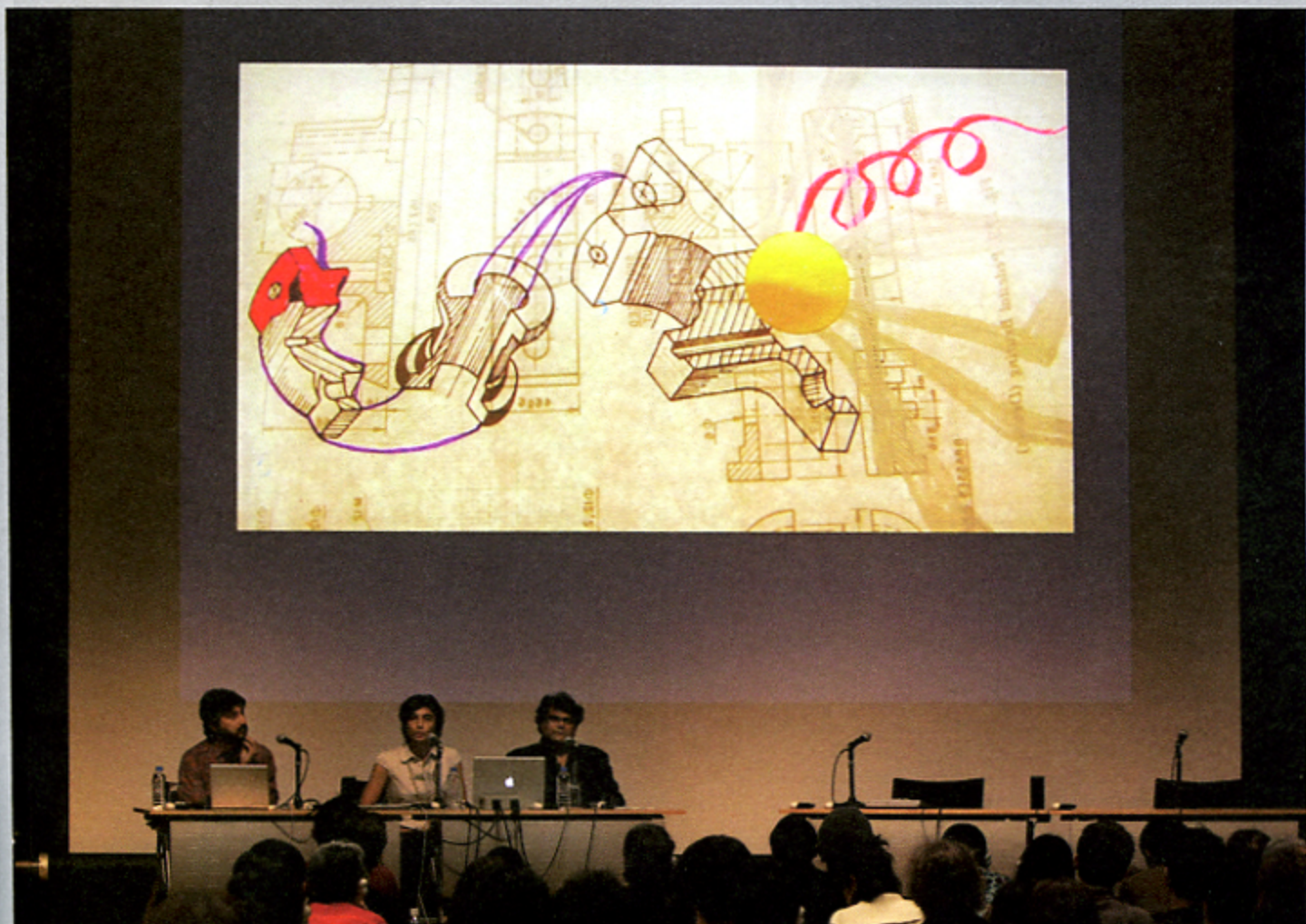
poetry or New Delhi streets—as a palimpsest that upon close inspection can reveal histories long overlooked. In the context of India, where readings of the *Mahābhārata* and other sacred Hindu texts are fiercely, and often violently, contested by Hindu sects and secularists, Raqs' open-source, multi-author credo carries an important political valence.

In many of their projects, Raqs join the metaphor of the palimpsest or recension with that of the rhizome, a nod to French Marxist-Freudian philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept to describe non-hierarchical or decentralized systems of information that resemble botanical root structures. The architecture of the internet, as an interconnected system of nodes, mirrors a rhizomatic structure. This analogy took solid form in the architecture of one of Raqs' most seminal works, *The KD Vyas Correspondence* (2006), shown at the Museum for Communication in Frankfurt. A collaboration with architects Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, the piece consists of 18 white cubes housing small video monitors attached to a network of steel tubes, and it resembles an oversized version of the wooden molecular models used by chemistry students. The monitors display images of cities and villages from 40 places in the world that Raqs had visited in the previous eight years, and they are each accompanied by a reading of 18 imagined "letters" exchanged between Raqs and the fictional KD Vyas, dubbed by Raqs as the "redactor" of the *Mahābhārata*, a text about which they have written: "There is nothing new. Whatever is there is there in the *Mahābhārata*, and whatever is not there in the *Mahābhārata* is not worth the effort." Raqs describe *The KD Vyas Correspondence* as: "an instance of a perennially new-media work, because it is deeply hypertextual, every recension links to other recensions, every story contains the threads of many other stories." Like the city landscape, in Raqs' reading, the

In conjunction with their recondite intellectual aspirations, Raqs Media are committed to their core mission of offering an archaeology of the present, picking apart the current state of life in urban India.

Mahābhārata is a palimpsest, and one that remains alive and in flux.

In conjunction with their recondite intellectual aspirations, Raqs are committed to their core mission of offering an archeology of the present, picking apart the current state of life in urban India. At New York's New Museum in January, Raqs performed a three-evening lecture entitled "The Pupil Dilates in Darkness," which featured elements of "To the Distant Observer," a similar lecture they gave at Tokyo's Mori Art Museum in November 2008. Part one, "An Illegible Signature," was divided up into short passages and read alternately by Bagchi, Narula and Sengupta, accompanied by a projection of images and short videos synchronized with the text. Drawing on the writings of Jane Caplan, a historian at the University of Oxford who studies the relationship between handwriting and individual identity, the piece begins: "To be legible is to be readable," but almost immediately devolves into an examination of various shades of gray between the legible and the illegible in writing, law and urban planning—"An insistence of legibility produces its own shadow, the illegible. Between the bare-faced lie and the naked truth lies the zone of illegibility—the only domain where the act of interpretation retains a certain ontological and epistemic significance." The dialectical thinking at the core of Raqs' analysis is captured in the line: "Legibility, when it eats its own tail, digests itself into illegibility." Raqs, skeptical theorists



of postmodern culture, use the archetypal symbol of a serpent with its tail in its mouth to explain the interrelationship of oppositional forces, an observation gleaned from ancient literature and new technology, the cityscape and realms of fantasy.

Raqs connected ideas about the function of cinema with urban history in their lecture-performance "As Transient as a Whale" in late March at the end of their month-long residency at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong. They bridged their research on Kowloon Walled City—the tiny 26,000-square-meter enclave of squatters' apartments that boasted a population of 50,000 before it was torn down in 1993—with the recent arrival of a lost humpback whale in Hong Kong Harbor, a serendipitous mirroring of Raqs' recent project *Unusually Adrift From the Shoreline* (2008). A site-specific installation at the Rådhuset, in the town of Sandnes in southwestern Norway, *Unusually Adrift* was installed inside a former cinema, where they constructed a ten-meter-tall functioning lighthouse made from wood. Twice a day, from the top of the lighthouse and at the local mall, city hall, library and cultural center Raqs broadcasted the plaintive sound of whale songs, recalling the city's history as a fishing and whaling village. In their lecture at Asia Art Archive, Raqs explored the latent psychological content of cinema, metaphorically linking their lighthouse—"The cinema is a space for a beam of light that transforms the cares of each day into dreams that set sail into the night of the inner life of the people of a town... It helps some dreams float away and others to come back ashore"—to the depiction of Kowloon Walled City in video games and Hong Kong films (excerpts of which Raqs projected during the lecture)—"If you were to think of this space as a repository of memories, it would be the most haunted place on earth. Yet it is not the fact of density alone that can account for the

way in which this territory disappears in real space and reappears so often in imagined space."

Connecting disciplines such as urbanism and cinema studies while borrowing liberally from scholars and others theorists is part of Raqs' objective to "create their own context for their work." In conversing with AAP, Bagchi describes the trio as "autodidacts who have developed vast relationships with many disciplines" and whose critical distance from these disciplines, including contemporary art, keeps them going. As such Raqs' real medium is dialogue and discourse—a torrent of words and ideas that form a vast intertextual, cross-disciplinary conversation.

This embrace of prolixity, fluidity and openness puts Raqs on the same side as Amartya Sen in India's ongoing culture wars between secularists and Hindutva, or Hindu nationalists. In *The Argumentative Indian*, Sen explains the historical importance of philosophical and religious debate on the Subcontinent as the foundation of democracy and secularism in India, writing against European neo-colonists who maintain that democracy was a European "gift" to the Subcontinent and against Hindu nationalists who hold that India has always been an exclusively Hindu nation. Like Sen, Raqs are humanists, intent on maintaining a solidarity with the neglected minority. As Sengupta intoned in the Hong Kong lecture, Raqs' subject is: "The people who are displaced by history, who come in the way of history, become absences, gaps, holes in the record and the fact that they are missing also often goes unrecorded. Millions of people fade from history and often the memory of their disappearance also fades with time. With the disappearance of ways of life, entire communities and the lived experiences and the memories that constitute them vanish or are forced to become something other than what they are accustomed to being."