

# ArtReview

INTERNATIONAL ART &amp; STYLE

JUNE 2006 £4.90

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## ON THE MAP

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Seen as a cross between an anti-capitalist counter-espionage unit and a hip hop posse, the collective has considerable cachet in the art world today. The Delhi-based Raqs collective has recently been described by Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of Documenta 11, as 'the model of the artist intellectual'. Since 1991, its founders, Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, have been creating art works – in forms as diffuse as photography, documentary film and digital media – that engage with India's seismic social and cultural changes.

**Below:** the Raqs collective, Delhi, March 2006. Photographed by Liz Thompson

The growing visibility of Raqs, which takes its name from a Persian and Urdu word for the trance-like state into which whirling dervishes enter when they dance, comes at a time when the field of what might be called 'Third World urbanism' is flourishing like never before.

As the West wakes up to the demographic and economic importance that China and India will have in the coming century, speculators and real-estate developers are flocking east in the hope of cashing in on an oriental gold rush. No longer do the gleaming towers of New York or the pleasure domes of Las Vegas define the unfolding contours of global modernity.

At the same time there is a decided interest in the communities and peoples who fail to profit from, and who may even be further immiserated by, those developments. Mike Davis, author of the definitive text on postmodern LA, *City of Quartz*, has just published *Planet of Slums*; Rem Koolhaas is currently

involved in mapping the 'exploding city' of Lagos, while filmmakers Fernando Meirelles and Michael Glawogger have shone spotlights on the underbellies of Rio and Indonesia. *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta's chronicle of hidden Mumbai, has been heaped with praise. It's clear that favela chic – and barrio- or ghetto-chic – is a boom industry.

'Delhi feels dynamic, chaotic, urgent,' says Jeebesh Bagchi of Raqs, with a sense of alarm and excitement. 'The city has imploded massively as the result of expanding global networks. 200,000 immigrants enter it each year and live in squatter settlements and temporary architectures. There's tremendous turbulence and a tremendous creative energy, with thousands of its inhabitants trying to make sense of this contested terrain.'

Raqs, however, is keen for its work to be seen as more than a series of dispatches, however complex and nuanced, from the frontline of a Delhi in



an advanced stage of upheaval. 'We don't like abstract formulations,' says Monica Narula. 'The crisis, the demolitions and all the new social encounters – which are very expressive – help create a very activating context for our work.' But while their location in Delhi may have instigated Raqs, she says, the experiences and reflections that ensue aren't exclusive to them. 'You have to remember that there's a First World in every Third World, and a Third World in every First World.'

'We're interested in lateral movements across the city,' adds Bagchi, 'the psychogeography not just of the towers and of the streets, but through interstitial space.'

Much of the theoretical work done by Raqs has been dedicated to analysing the possibilities of cyberspace. They advance the idea of a 'digital commons', in which the privatisation of knowledge exemplified by proprietary software

could be challenged. In so doing, Raqs helps to raise debates about India's relationship to technology beyond the relatively crude issues of call centres, outsourcing and HTML-coding. Indeed, its work might be seen as a form of hacking or reverse-engineering.

Raqs helped to establish Sarai, a cutting-edge research unit based at Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. Sarai sponsors and develops strategies for exploring the intersection of urbanism, law, technology and media affairs. The annual Sarai Readers are vital texts for understanding contemporary Indian politics and culture.

Raqs may be well known in some digital and critical-theory circles, but it is not without critics. Many complain that its work belongs to the academy rather than the art gallery. Bagchi, who cites the Lebanese Atlas Group and the Milanese Multiplicity agency as inspirations, acknowledges that the

output of Raqs emerges from a process of dense political, analytic and artistic enquiry. 'We want to be on the boundaries between many disciplines, at the intersection between research, technology, art practice. We need critical distance as well as engagement.'

In Delhi itself, this interdisciplinary approach has proved catalytic. Bagchi notes with approval the numerous artist-run spaces, many of them transient, that have opened up in recent years. A kind of counterculture is emerging, though its loosely affiliated members would never use that label.

Young painters, filmmakers and performers are increasingly moving to Delhi rather than to Mumbai or Kolkata. Their subject matters – nationalism, secularism, consumerism – may be familiar, but their approaches are not. Many are exploring video, audio and mixed-media formats in preference to more traditional arts. 'Like Raqs, they're snatching social space,' enthuses Bagchi. 'They're creating new ways of mapping space and time. It is most exciting.'

*Raqs, 8 June-27 Aug, Sydney Biennale (biennaleofsydney.com.au); Nature Morte, Delhi, August (+91 11 41740215, naturemorte.com)*

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