

Raqs Media Collective

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RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE,
<28°28'n/77°15'e>, 2002,
multimedia project.

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The Raqs Media Collective marks a radical departure from the norms of mainstream contemporary Indian art, which is segregated by medium and style, and dominated by conventionally trained visual artists. Raqs is a group of media practitioners, filmmakers and writers based in New Delhi. Active in the areas of documentary filmmaking, photography and new-media art, its members also formulate critical accounts of the cyberspace and urban cultural environments in which they work. Raqs steers between the specialist discourses of technocrats and artists respectively. Unlike the technocrats, Raqs brings a politically nuanced perspective to bear on the relationship between the internet and material society, especially in India, where the conditions of postcoloniality and globalisation contribute to an ongoing crisis of entitlement and distribution. Opposing the alienation of the community from technology, Raqs warns against the creation of new elite and subaltern classes based on differential access to internet resources.

Raqs's utopian aims are matched by its pragmatism. In collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, Raqs has established 'Sarai: The New Media Initiative' (www.sarai.net). One of its major projects, the 'Cybermohalla', involves the Sarai team in an ongoing process of mutual education, both online and offline, with children in a Delhi shantytown. Pursuing its ideal of a free-software culture, Raqs has initiated 'Opus' (An Open Platform for Unlimited Signification), an online space where people can access and redistribute source images and texts, in creative violation of the copyright principle.

Raqs's collective form challenges the romantic image of the artist as a solitary genius who fights off influences and collaborations to shape his unique style – an ideal

still influential in contemporary Indian art. In the long term, Raqs's protean and interdisciplinary approach – its freedom from a singularity of chosen material, style, concept or self-definition – will have the effect of dismantling the primacy of the self-contained artwork, and validating collegial, participatory and post-media artmaking strategies.

By reason of their training and organisational activity, the members of Raqs have a critical interest in modes of representation, in strategies of framing, showing and telling – questions that are not as immediate to conventionally trained visual artists in India, who often remain preoccupied with questions cast in the played-out discourse of style and content, to the neglect of conceptual problems. By contrast, Raqs articulates the relationship of the artistic imagination to political consciousness, and the intersection between the conceptions of pleasure and justice.

The Raqs Media Collective was founded in New Delhi in 1991 by Jeebesh Bagchi (born 1965), Monica Narula (born 1969) and Shuddhabrata Sengupta (born 1968). They have published three anthologies through the platform of Sarai: *Double Take: Looking at the Documentary* (2000); *The Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain* (2001); and *The Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life* (2002). Their web-based projects include 'Opus' (www.sarai.net/compositions/opus/opus.htm) and 'A Concise Lexicon of/for the Digital Commons' (www.sarai.net/compositions/texts/works/lexicon.htm). The collective's multimedia work, titled <28°28'n/77°15'e> 2001–2002: *An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life* (2002), was shown at documenta, Kassel (2002).