

(In the foreground) **Solomon Benjamin**. *City Guide I*. 2005.

(In the background) **Ravikant + Prabhat Jha**. *AUTO POESIS*.

CAPITAL CITY ARTISTS

Lucian Harris finds the Raqs Media Collective and its collaborators pushing the new media envelope as they resourcefully critique uneven urban transformations.



Sarai Media Lab. *Ectropy Index*.2005.

WORKING WITH AN EXTENDED FAMILY OF COLLABORATORS, THE Raqs Media Collective has produced some of the more interesting and less predictable art to come out of the Indian subcontinent in recent years.

Ironically, Raqs only began to function as Contemporary artists in 2001 when they co-founded the Sarai Media Lab at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. However, the Collective has been around since 1992, when its core members Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta graduated from film school.

Though the influence of documentary filmmaking is quite apparent in their work, they have resolutely refused to allow their practice to be pinned down. Variously described as curators, editors, artists, filmmakers, publishers and media practitioners, they do not like to be seen as part of the recent market-driven boom in Indian art – from an early stage, they seem to have forged international connections, showing at events such as the Venice and Liverpool Biennials, Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany and Ars Electronica in Linz, Austria.

Considering their 'outsider' mantle, it was appropriate that Raqs' exhibition in London last year should have been held at Watermans Media Art Gallery in Brentford, far removed from the fashionable art quarters of the East End. *Building Sight*, with its nine video and photographic works, was

first shown at the Kunstverein in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2006. In London, it was organised by Ilze Black, Watermans' new media curator who cleverly resolved the constraints of showing multiple video works in a small gallery space.

The cacophony of sound and the flicker of projected images that enveloped the visitor seemed like an appropriate by-product of the show considering the extent to which the Collective's work revels in the aesthetics of modern information technology. *Building Sight*, as the name suggested, built cumulatively to focus on a coherent set of issues and concerns. Most obviously addressed was the Indian city, and in particular, Delhi, the city they come from. The sense of a fragmentary vision incrementally expanding was continually present

in Raqs' works in both an artistic and curatorial sense.

Despite the obvious architectural allusions, the exhibition was less about bricks and mortar than it was about the struggles of the city dweller. *City Guide 1*(2005) by Solomon Benjamin and the Sarai Media Lab was a lecture-performance-video piece in which architect Benjamin delivered a Power Point presentation about Bangalore, one of India's fastest growing cities. Taking the image of the hydra as a model, he examined the way unregulated urban forces – traders, squatters, residential colonies – resisted the pressures of city planners, corporations and other interest groups. Behind him, a collage of photographs, maps and diagrams unfolded hypnotically, transforming a potentially dry lecture into an exploration of the aesthetics of information.

Popular resistance seemed to be a consistent theme in Raqs' work. Sanjay Kak's *The Dispute at the Dam Site* (2006) utilised an excerpt from *Words on Water*, the Delhi-based film-maker's 2002 documentary on the Narmada Valley dam project and its impact on the local population. The short, looped sequence showed a crowd of protesters who had taken over the dam site and an almost comical confrontation with a local bureaucrat who tried to intercede.

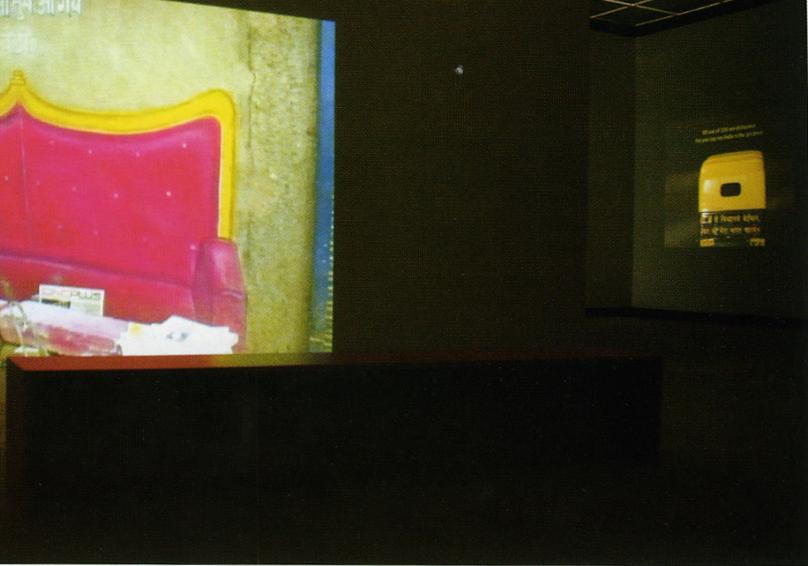
Kak's film was the only piece in the show deviating from a direct

examination of the city. The interest in the tensions arising from man's constant interference with landscapes in the interest of development and progress was clearly present in Ruchir Joshi's video *Gurgaon Giraffe* (2006). Here, a mechanical digger scooped earth from a huge building site in this thrusting, fast-growing Delhi suburb - the blurred focus of the video transformed the machine into a massive animal caught in a strange feeding ritual.

In a number of the works, the people of the city were absent subjects, their presence and their struggles inferred or abstracted. In the case of *Manus* (2005) by Mumbai-based photographer and filmmaker Satyajit Pande, the video focused on the hands of passengers as they grasped for the straps and bars in one of the city's crowded suburban trains.

The Ecropy Index (2005) an HTML-based audio-visual work by the Sarai Media Lab reflected most directly the Collective's affinity to new media practices and web-based art. An ectropic index is described as "the measure of the increase of information, or of order, in a given system". The work itself, with its user-defined sequences, leading to texts, photographs and videos, explored forms of categorisation and control in the urban realm, ranging from maps to criminal records.

One amongst the many projects nurtured under the Raqs umbrella, *Cybermohalla*, consisted of three media labs in working class districts in Delhi, in which local people were encouraged to participate in a creative dialogue and respond to their urban surroundings. *A Wall and A Sofa* (2001-5) by the Cybermohalla Ensemble showed an alleyway close to the Dakshinpuri lab getting transformed by the act of painting a rough stone bench to resemble an ornate sofa. Rendered in time-lapse film, this



(In the foreground) **Cybermohalla Ensemble. A Wall and A Sofa.** 2001-05.
(In the background) **Ravikant + Prabhat Jha. AUTO POESIS.** PHOTOGRAPHS BY MONICA NARULA.

intervention became the backdrop for interesting activity as locals passing by took a seat.

Raqs demanded engagement from the viewer - more than is normally expected in our attention-deficit culture. There would be only a handful willing to take the time to let the full impact of the work sink in. *Building Sight* was a thought-provoking, indeed, a powerful show, which, as its name suggested, worked cumulatively to focus on a coherent set of issues and concerns. While it functioned on many different levels, it assumed an understanding of Indian issues, which many visitors to Watermans' would not have had. The artists were clearly aware of this and took on a more vernacular approach in their exhibition housed at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh - here, many of the works dealt with issues related to this American steel-manufacturing city.

Raqs makes art that is refreshingly political in an age of superficiality and gloss. The collaborative ethos, multi-disciplinary practices and refusal to be constrained by the limitations of

specialised authorship give strength to their vision. There remains though a paradoxical tension in their art, and indeed, in the position they now find themselves. While they engage with themes of popular resistance and have an inclusive, socially-grounded approach to modes of art production, the intellectual and conceptually complex nature of their practice threatens to limit its accessibility to those not conversant with the range of their semantics. It is a condition that affects the new media art scene in general, which has produced some of the most interesting and challenging art to emerge in recent years, yet which remains something of an insiders' world obscured behind a curtain of jargon-heavy discourse that seems forbidding to the uninitiated.

Raqs will co-curate *Manifesta7*, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art in Italy this year (from 19th July to 2nd November) and are clearly on the cusp of international recognition. It will be interesting to see how they respond to success and the concurrent pressures to engage with the commercial art world.