

## **A Short Lexicon of/for Raqs Media Collective**

Gunalan Nadarajan

### **Specific Intellectuals**

The French philosopher Michel Foucault warned that the intellectual's work needs to be tempered with a constant alertness to the various discursive and institutional complicities that constitute that function. For him, the role of the intellectual after "the most recent upheaval" (namely, May '68) was to embark on a "local and regional...not totalizing...struggle against power, a struggle aimed at revealing and undermining power where it is most invisible and insidious. It is not to 'awaken consciousness' that we struggle...but to sap power, to take power" which was for him, "an activity conducted alongside those who struggle for power, and not their illumination from a safe distance". He advised that it was equally important for the intellectual while doing this to also struggle against the forms of power that transform him/her into its object and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge', 'truth', 'consciousness' and 'discourse'.

Foucault conceives of this new role to have come about from intellectuals having "got used to working, not in the modality of the 'universal', the 'exemplary', the 'just-and-true-for-all', but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations)", which according to him, has "given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles". It is, he claims, within the specific articulations and struggles over "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power related to the true" that these so-called specific intellectuals achieve a "general significance...and have effects and implications which are not simply professional or sectoral".

Raqs Media Collective is a group of specific intellectuals. Their art is concerned with unpacking and problematizing categories of their very own everyday lives in ways that empower their various constituencies to engage with these categories differently; and the categories they choose to work in range from legal constructs such as those that define the proprieties of private property – 'what is a slum?' and 'what is land?' to the more abstract notions of 'labour' and the 'global.' By subjecting these categories to scrutiny such that their socio-political complicities become readily apparent, Raqs' art works and political interventions enable the development of alternative ways of approaching these categories, or even of entirely new categories. That Raqs has indeed developed a lexicon to carry out and deliberate on their work needs to be conceived as a first step in this movement towards alternative categories and concepts.

### **Strategic Nomadism**

"The creation of a Sarai was intended to open up a 'home for nomads' and a resting place for practices of new media nomadism. Traditionally, sarais were also nodes in the communications system (horse-mail!) and spaces where theatrical entertainments, music, dervish dancing, and philosophical disputes could all be staged. They were hospitable to a wide variety of journeys – physical, cultural, and intellectual. In medieval Central and South Asia, sarais were the typical spaces for a concrete translocality, with their own culture of custodial care, conviviality, and refuge. They also contributed to syncretic

languages and ways of being. We would do well to emulate even in part aspects of this tradition in the new media culture of today... This might create oases of locatedness along the global trade routes of new media culture.”

A refusal to become entrapped by location seems to conceptually ground (continuously uproot?) Raqs’ conceptualization of and participation in Sarai, an initiative they developed in collaboration with academics Ravi Vasudevan and Ravi Sundaram. The nomadic strategies employed by Raqs are not based on an endless vacating of one place in order to move on to another, but on a way of developing circuits and routes without setting roots. That is, to engage with locatedness without becoming tied to a particular notion of ‘geographical location’ that may have become defunct within a larger network of global movements. Sarai is rhizomatic insofar as “a rhizome doesn’t begin and doesn’t end, but is always in the middle, between things, intermezzo.” And this rhizomatic movement is contrary to the rooting investments of the tree - “The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb, ‘to be’, but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: ‘and&and&and&’. One finds in many of Raqs’ projects this rhizomatic accumulation of conjunctions and alliances with those of other like-minded initiatives – for example, their works on the digital commons, copyright, piracy, public domain and the Cybermohalla.

Their nomadism is also strategic insofar as it initiates and sustains an ethics of hospitality – one where those momentarily defined as ‘other’ (and a fixed notion of other is difficult in nomadic cultures where the notion of a community is complicated by endless rhythms of comings and goings) are made to ‘feel at home’; not merely tolerated but invited to participate exactly by way of their difference. A hospitality that evokes a responsible relationship to those they associate with for strategic purposes, specifically to keep vigilant to their different agendas even as they rhizomatically align with them. Sarai, that Raqs have played a crucial role in formulating, clearly embodies an ethics of hospitality in its programmes (e.g., seminars and publications) and spatial facilitation of creative collaboration (e.g., fellowships and visiting artists) . It has become a local node in a global network of similar urban initiatives hosting critical scrutiny, conviviality and collaboration.

### **Urban Choreography**

“Raqs is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and means the state that ‘whirling dervishes’ enter into when they whirl. It is also a word used for dance.”

The propriety of bodies and their movements with reference to specific spaces have always been subjects of governmental control and management. Many of these proprieties are enacted through the creation and careful policing of spatio-legal constructs. For example, the notion of the slum, defined almost always by highlighting its temporariness in contradistinction to more permanent settlements, effectively prescribes permanence as the legally preferred mode of spatial settlement. The notion of place as property, rightfully belonging to particular bodies that have exclusive rights to determine its use and occupation, exemplifies and perpetuates a complex politics of space that is

seldom subjected to critical contestation. Cities, which are the concrete theatres where these proprieties are enacted, therefore demand our critical attention.

Delhi, with specific reference to how it has defined its urban plans, legal categories or its political concepts, has come under critical and systematic scrutiny by Raqs in many of their works. In fact their artistic and political concerns are grounded in and often begin from the most immediate reference point of their everyday lives – the city of Delhi. They claim, “all that we do, and how we do it, has to do with the place. At the same time, we are not just talking about Delhi”. New Delhi in this sense is their immediate theatre of operations, even as their investigations and interventions into this city provide useful reference points for both themselves and others to speculate on the global permutations of similar urban phenomena. For example, their sound installation (*NDL Jn*, Belfast, 2002) dealing with what they characterize as the ‘daily migrations’ into and out of New Delhi stages the ‘spectral’ choreography of these transitory beings through the sounds of the arrivals and departures of train passengers at New Delhi Junction. This work affords interesting parallels and disjunctions to their work on the routines of airline passengers who haunt airport transit lounges (Zurich, 2002). It is noteworthy that in addition to the various art works that speculate on and make apparent the subtext of the city, the work of Raqs has also involved concrete interventions into the city. These works force an existing set of urban complicities and regimes of propriety to become difficult to sustain as such; for example, their work with members of Sarai that documents and unpacks the workings of New Delhi’s pirate digital media markets, or the Cybermohalla project, which aims to develop the creative abilities of young people living in squatter settlements in New Delhi. These initiatives subject the city to ‘alternative choreographies’ enabling different spatio-temporal routines and trajectories.

**References:**

All references to Foucault’s notion of the specific intellectual are derived from *Power/Knowledge*

Raqs in “How Latitudes Become Forms”, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, 2003.

Deleuze and Guattari, *On the Line*, translated by John Johnston, Semiotext(e). 1983

**(30 Sept 2004)**