

## Puzzling the World

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The work of Raqs Media Collective has a place within the repertoire of practices aimed at a reflective confrontation with contemporary realities. This aim comes together in their work with a critical interest in the archive and in the politics of representation, characteristic of the background of the Collective's three members in documentary filmmaking. Concerned particularly with the practices of the media and new technologies, the nature and dissemination of knowledge, the management of information, and the architecture of rumour/rumour of architecture, the Collective's work represents a striking reflection on the relationships between global signifiers and vernacular referents. Specifically, a search for the universal *within* the particular, for the global or dominant signifier *within* the expression of singularities. This approach has the advantage of breaking with simplistic schemas of the centre and periphery, and overcoming the aporias inherent to thinking based on the binary opposition of "local" and "global". The task is to establish a new derivation of the project of modernity, which the three members of Raqs agree to call "off-modern", in the term introduced by the media-theorist Svetlana Boym. Being "off modern" is inhabiting the trajectory of "a lateral move of the knight in a game of chess. A detour into some unexplored potentialities of the modern project".<sup>1</sup> In this context, their work could be understood as investigations in which images, texts and installations are the supports, rather than the final results, of their attempts to rethink human-world relations. With the opening of Sarai in Delhi in 2001, Raqs set up an autonomous context for its own work. Conceived, together with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, as a "heterotopia", Sarai is a multi-disciplinary space dedicated to visual cultures, to tactical media and to a critical auscultation of urban situations.<sup>2</sup>

Raqs Media Collective defines itself as "an ensemble; everything it does is an ensemble of existing or anticipated practices."<sup>3</sup> "Ensemble" here refers not to any group homogeneity but rather alludes to the egalitarian rapport existing between intellectual peers united by elective affinities. This collegial structure cultivates for the Collective a certain ubiquity, which allows it to multiply its points of intervention in the world, and which is supplemented by the versatility of its members, who combine the roles of curator, filmmaker, writer, media theorist, artist, social scientist and cultural producer. On top of this comes a pronounced taste for "connective aesthetics" and the development of extended collaborations. This predilection for multiplication and proliferation is also a manner of developing a thought-strategy of *déclassement* as a means of challenging the certitudes of modernity (the "nation-state", "progress", "identity"...).

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgic Technology : Notes for an Off-Modern Manifesto", [http://artefact.mi2.hr/a03/lang\\_en/theory\\_boym\\_en.htm](http://artefact.mi2.hr/a03/lang_en/theory_boym_en.htm)

<sup>2</sup> It would have been equally possible to begin so: "At the Mass Communication Research Center at Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi, there encountered one another three young people equally stricken with the same malady: they were all gifted with an energy sufficient to fidelity, a mutual probity recalcitrant to all betrayal etc, etc". And Raqs Media Collective took shape in 1992 under the impulse of a wish to preserve and prolong these promises made to oneself and to others as a student and to secure some protection against the blandishments of that "media business" which was already at this period on the rise. The most immediate reason for forming the Collective, however, was the wish "to work on a film (which is still unrealized) which took us on a long sea voyage, to archives, and to thinking about the anthropometry of the soul. Aspects of that project still continue to surprise us by their presence in much of what we do today". Raqs will nonetheless go on to realize several documentary films and will also be involved in the founding of the *Public Service Broadcasting Trust*, the principal motor behind documentary film production in India. The opening of Sarai in 2001 can be considered as the conclusion of that phase in Raq's history which consisted in the conquering, for itself, of a space which would guarantee its autonomy of action ...

<sup>3</sup> Raqs Media Collective, "The Concise Lexicon" in *Sarai Reader 03, Shaping Technologies*, 2003, p. 359.

It is for this reason that many of the group's ideas touch on the image of the "nomad". The expression of the group's relation to place (above all to Delhi), the evocation of a "nomadic citizenship", the culture of "xenophilia", and indeed the member's own principled refusal to "specialize" – all these find their support in this key image, which **could be** also an attitude to the world. The general implications of displacement and liberty are obvious, but Raqs understands the nomad in a more specific way. For if the nomad threatens established order by emancipating herself from all frontiers and territories, her context is nonetheless circumscribed. Her circuit is marked out and defined by places of hospitality which are by their nature zones of contact, effervescence and exchange.<sup>4</sup> Such an anthropological reading allows Raqs to overcome the ambiguity surrounding the relationships between "nomad", "migrant" and "exile", an ambiguity willingly sustained by the discourse of globalisation, which subsumes all of these into the same diasporic condition. By making its relation to place more complex, Raqs avoids presenting itself in the terms of the globalist orthodoxy, which uses the prefix "trans-" to critique the local and to create a political opposition between morally superior cosmopolitans and inferior and potentially reactionary locals – and asserts that the real heroes of world history are the migrants.<sup>5</sup>

If nomadism remains one decisive element in Raqs's conception of the world, their work is also characterised by the theme of irreducible mystery, which also originates, no doubt, in the will to disrupt the presuppositions of modernity. While the "conspiracy theory" is the pre-eminent narrative mode for the contradictions and transformations wracking the contemporary world, the resort most favoured by Raqs is a kind of "encrypting". "*There are a lot of games of semantic hide-and-seek going on in the work*" because "*the intensification of scrutiny must be met with the amplification of guile*".<sup>6</sup> Very often, the images with which Raqs works take the form of rebuses, of puzzles encoding a process of thought. This liking for the enigma becomes explicit in the Collective's use of the rhetoric of detective fiction. *Five Pieces of Evidence* (2003) evokes missing persons, urban myths and cartographies of global network. The installation is organized in five screens, each bearing a title drawn from a convention of detective fiction, namely: "The Missing Person", "The Scene of the Crime", "The Assailant", "The Trail" and "The Motive". Consider also the title of the multi-media installation exhibited at the Bose Pacia Gallery in New York in 2005, *The Impostor in the Waiting Room*, which might easily be that of a whodunnit. On one of the screens, we follow the evolution of a bowler-hatted character out of a Magritte painting, a familiar figure whose origins have been traced by certain commentators to the influence of detective fiction on the surrealist painter.<sup>7</sup> But in all these cases, any hope that intrigue will find a resolution goes unfulfilled. Such is, perhaps, the paradox of this aspect of Raqs's work. It creates a surface over which one can wander, but which cannot necessarily be penetrated. Raqs's work does not seek to render situations explicit but prefers rather to stay at a more indefinable level where there does not appear to be any possible narrative. In the same way, the work's spatial organisation – notably the use of multiple screens – breaks the constraints of linear narrative by separating and de-

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of the use of this idea by Raqs Media Collective see: "Translocations", <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/texts/texts.wac?id=295>. And let us add that the appellation "Sarai" is indeed derived from the designation for the roadside "hospices" for travellers which were scattered along the trade and travel routes of medieval Central Asia.

<sup>5</sup> It is often difficult to distinguish the discourse of theoreticians of globalization from that of trans-national capitalism itself. Consider, for example, the sociologist Anthony King meditating on the world as a "single place" and the Reebok advertising slogan: "On planet Reebok there are no boundaries". The advanced theorist and the late capitalist speak a language similar...

<sup>6</sup> Except where otherwise indicated, the remarks cited are drawn from e-mail exchanges with Raqs Media Collective.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Wollen, *Paris Manhattan. Writings on Art*, Verso, 2004.

synchronizing the various elements that make up the mystery. This is also a way of disrupting a teleological rhetoric in favour of what Raqs calls an “*unresolved poetics*”.

These strategies presuppose an approach to the visual that is more argumentative than narrative, oscillating constantly between poetry and discourse, playfulness and gravity, fiction and documentary, whose references to the experiments of Chris Marker or the essay-films of Harun Farocki are evident. In Raqs’s work, images acquire the status of aphorisms or epigrams, of highly concentrated, precise renditions of individual thoughts about the world: “*We like to think that practice is theory realized in the world of objects, processes and affects, and that theory is just practice in conversation with itself*”. **Images are not treated as objects of knowledge, but rather as tools for knowledge,<sup>8</sup> rather as in Walter Benjamin’s aspiration to “write” history with and through images.** In other words, theory itself here becomes a visual practice.<sup>9</sup> Particularly revealing in this respect are the texts which accompany the installations. They are never explanations or translations of the work, or instructions for its interpretation. They are rather a second voice, in which the work never speaks directly but always allusively, to the extent that we are forced to consider the problems inherent in the very idea of the textual.

One of these strategies for the transformation of theory into an image or figure is the recourse to “conceptual personages” (who are also “**activating characters**” in the sense of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze). This strategy allows the establishment of specifically individual categories to index and translate the symptoms of the contemporary world. The text *X Notes on Practice* details a number of such personages.<sup>10</sup> Particularly striking are the figures of the Artisan, the Pirate, the Illegal Migrant, and the Call Centre Worker. From the work’s description of them, these figures seem to evolve in the interstices, caught up in ambivalence: at once actors and witnesses, vulnerable but at the same time vigilant over their own capacity for action. However, these characters seem not so much to *inhabit* Raqs’s works as to *haunt* them, as we see in the pile of abandoned footwear in *Lost New Shoes* (2005). In *With Respect to Residue* (2004), the group issued a call for an alternative historiography, recognizing that there are “*no histories of residue, no atlases of abandonment, no memoirs of what a person was but could not be*”. Ghost (hi)stories... **Stories of spectre, not of spirit, not ontology, but “hauntology”.**<sup>11</sup> The ghost has its being between the palpable and the impalpable, the visible and the invisible, appearing distinctly to some but not to others, silent to one person, eloquent to the next. It warns or punishes. The ghost does not remain withdrawn at the margins. It is rather an affirmation that the virtual is real, the paranormal normal.

The list of these ghostly figures which have their being in the “in-between” is not complete without the impostor. For Raqs “*the impostor, the secret agent - are therapists, they help you come to terms with the impossibility of solitary claims to truth, and the simultaneous difficulty of dealing with the conflicts and the pleasures born out of the collision of different claims to truth*”.

Also in this category is the strange KD Vyas, Raqs’s “partner in conversation” in *The KD Vyas Correspondence Vol. 1. The Mahabharata*, an immense synthesis of Hindu mythology elaborated over several centuries, is ascribed by Indian tradition to a single author, Krishna Dwaipayana Vyas, who is also supposed to have written several other works. Tradition has it that “KD” Vyas, who is one of the poem’s central characters, is also its narrator. In reality,

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<sup>8</sup> One might say, paraphrasing Georges Bataille, that that which counts is not the defined meaning of the images but rather the work they do.

<sup>9</sup> The work of Raqs Media Collective and that of Atlas Group Project as well suggest that criticism and theory may have to explore other media of dissemination besides those of the printed text, the scholarly article or monograph, or even language as such in its prosaic, discursive forms.

<sup>10</sup> Raqs Media Collective, “X Notes on Practice”, [www.raqsmediacollective.net/texts1.html](http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/texts1.html)

<sup>11</sup> “Haunting is a part of our social world, and understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it”. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 27.

however, KD Vyas (Krishna="dark", Dwaipayana="island-born", Vyas indicates eloquence) is no proper name but an ordinary noun which might be translated as "compiler", even though, literally, the term designates less one who collects than one who disseminates. For Raqs, he is the "*impostor incarnate*". Like those impostors and forgers of the most extreme type, such as Psalmanazar,<sup>12</sup> KD Vyas creates history in order to become its protagonist.

The richness of the *Mahabharata* provides ever more new tools with which Raqs can regenerate its repertoire of contemporary engagements. Besides the enigmatic correspondence, this work also envisages the *Mahabharata*, and the quasi-organic relation uniting it to Vyas, as a model for (re)thinking the presuppositions of the new media and their characteristic forms of representation. It thus allows Raqs to work on the hypothesis of a certain "fraternity" between the compilers of traditional texts such as the *Mahabharata* and practitioners of the new media. By establishing this analogy, Raqs aims at ridding the author of the anxiety of influence, so as to re-inscribe her within the links of the network, thus exploding the very idea of an "original author". This reading takes its place within a familiar vein of the work of the Collective, one that finds particular expression in the work carried out in Sarai on the ideas of authorial rights and *open source*.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the project *OPUS*, "Open Platform for Unlimited Signification", has acquired considerable importance on both practical and theoretical planes. *OPUS* is an online space, and a software, which makes it possible to create and to show images, videos or texts and to modify work submitted by other users. In the spirit of collaboration and of shared creativity, it is possible to establish contact with, and to redistribute, individual works quite outside of any framework of "author's rights". With *OPUS*, Raqs introduced the idea of "rescension" in order to reflect linguistically the transformations undergone by creativity itself in a collaborative environment.<sup>14</sup> This idea signifies, initially, the rearrangement of a text by means of the incorporation into it of new elements - in such a manner, however, that the original textual tissue is not thereby effaced. In this respect, it is related to the idea of the "palimpsest".

In this sense, it may be said that "rescensions" form the very life-blood of the *Mahabharata*. It consists in a sedimentation of narrative upon narrative. A narrative constantly open to receive and welcome other characters and other plots. In situations where narrative is primarily orally mediated, the partners in such oral communication accept that the characters and the versions will be transformed as a result of their passage in and through different rescensions. There is nothing in the least linear about the narrative style of the *Mahabharata*; we see here, on the contrary, a proliferation of themes, the complexity of which can barely be imagined. The polyphony engendered by the irregular rhythms of the various rescensions weaves complex links between the individual histories and each one of these contains the incipient outlines of the ones that succeed it. Thus, the tree-like structure of the *Mahabharata*

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<sup>12</sup> In April 1704, great commotion was caused in the world of letters by the appearance of the book *Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa*. Authored by an (alleged) native of this island (the modern Taiwan) and fêted as the first thorough account of the locality, it quickly won many readers first in England and then all over Europe. Its author, however, one Georges Psalmanazar (1679?-1753) had, in fact, never set foot on Formosa – an imposture coming to light only with the posthumous publication of his memoirs in 1764. The impact of the book had been, nonetheless, so great that, still in 1808, Boucher de la Richarderie's *Bibliothèque Universelle des Voyages* continued to draw all its information on Formosa from this work, given that no other documents were available. Since Psalmanazar's text was still at this time the latest text on the question it was able to conserve a certain credibility...

<sup>13</sup> Open source is a technique of software realization in which the source code is given, together with permission to carry out any modification that may be desired.

<sup>14</sup> "The word *Rescension* comes from the practice of exegetical studies and textual criticism, and is taken to mean a re-configuration and re-working of prior textual, or narrative materials in such a way that the pre-existing material is not effaced. A *Rescension* is either a re-arrangement of an existing text, or a re-working of an existing text, incorporating new materials, and/or deleting some old ones or, a new edition with a substantive commentary or annotation". see: [www.opuscommons.net](http://www.opuscommons.net)

constitutes a very model of hypertextuality, a web of hyper-links permitting and legitimating a proliferation of different virtual journeys, such as are characteristic of the functioning of the World Wide Web itself. It is, moreover, on this note that KD Vyas opens his dialogue with Raqs, provocatively affirming that: “*There is nothing new in new media. Whatever is there is there in the Mahabharata, and whatever is not there in the Mahabharata is not worth the effort*”.

One might add yet another personage as an important “voice in the background” of the correspondence between Raqs and KD Vyas: Theodore Holm Nelson, who coined the term “hypertext” in 1965, and who is widely considered a visionary thanks to his idea of the *Xanadu* system, an early form of the Internet.<sup>15</sup> The term “hypertext” has specifically futuristic, high-tech connotations (hyper-cube, hyper-speed...), but, **for Nelson**, it points back to an ancient conception of the text as characterized by all sorts of non-linear interconnections. A book presenting two versions of a text, a palimpsest, the *marginalia* of medieval manuscripts, a set of footnotes – all these make use of hypertextual procedures. Thus, surprising as it may seem, we may recognize the fascination of the hypertextual already in so early a text as Pierre Bayle’s famous *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1697). Bayle was possessed by such an intense interest in footnotes that these often take up, in his great encyclopaedic work, more space on the page than the text “proper”. What we learn from this – an intuition of Nelson’s confirmed by the work of Julia Kristeva and Gérard Genette – is that every text is permeated through and through by other texts, past and still to come. From this point of view, computer and Internet do no more than make these always-present derivations more visible and easier to operate with – the caricature of this operation being “hyperfiction”.<sup>16</sup>

In *Literary Machines* (1980) Nelson writes: “Many people consider [hypertext] to be new, drastic and threatening. However, I would like to take the position that hypertext is fundamentally traditional and in the mainstream of literature”. This expanded conception of the hypertext might be usefully confronted with the remarks ascribed by Raqs to KD Vyas. The circulation of enunciations within the triangle Raqs-Vyas-Nelson might serve as inspiration for a discussion preliminary to a “counter-history” of what are referred to as “new media”. The *KD Vyas Correspondence* would thus represent the prolegomena to such a counter-history: a counter-history constructed specifically in opposition to that “technophilic” conception, propagated by such magazines as *Wired*, according to which technology would constitute the fundamental motor of cultural evolution, an idea which helps to found that evolutionist approach to media **geopolitics** structured according to the idea of a “digital divide”. In this light, this work would appear as a “detour into some of the unexplored potentialities of the modern project”: a detour intended to remind us of the fact that, if each culture speaks a foreign language, this is because its own language is already foreign to itself.

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<sup>15</sup> On Theodore Holm Nelson, see: Daniel Rosenberg "Electronic Memory" in Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding (eds.), *Histories of the Future*, Duke University Press, p.123-152. On the idea of the hypertext, see: George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, John Hopkins University Press, 1994 and Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au Seconde Degré*, Seuil, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Hyperfiction is a literary current which emerged in the USA in the middle of the 1980’s. This emergence was linked to all that followed from the use of computers as aids in the reading of texts. Reading on a computer screen makes reading in a linear manner more difficult, while new perspectives are opened up for fiction by the machine’s capacity to react in terms of the reader’s specific choices. It then becomes possible to imagine texts susceptible, simultaneously, of a whole series of alternative readings; these offer themselves for perusal fragment by fragment, in terms of non-linear itineraries. In the most highly elaborated hyperfictions, the computer allows the reading itinerary already followed by the reader, and her specific behaviour in the course of this itinerary, to contribute to deciding which text shall next be displayed on screen.