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Off Modern: A Conversation with Raqs

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I. Moinak Biswas: *Your recent show in Calcutta, 'Premonitions', seems to speak of the fractures within the flow of time that we all inhabit. An internally anomalous time has engaged you as artists for some time now ('The Imposter in the Waiting Room', the clock project, the factory project at Bolzano). What makes it important for you to address this question now? What does an apprehension of 'our time' have to do with this inquiry? In 'Premonitions' I felt there was an attempt to inflict an arrhythmic pulse of sorts on the viewer. Is it possible to talk about the politics of this?*

Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi): Lets try responding to your question with a query of our own, a speculation.

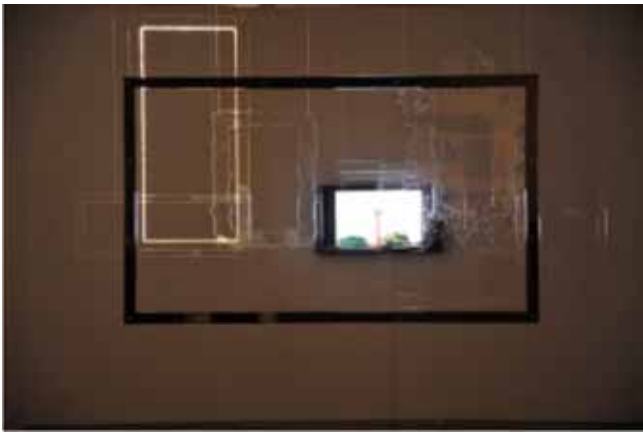
What if we could fold time in the same way as we can fold a piece of paper? Supposing we could fold it into a boat or an airplane, what kind of voyage would we find ourselves embarking on? Would we realize that our sense of our time, the time(s) we live in today, are also amenable to being folded in a way that can make us sense other times in a way that is suddenly up close and personal even as they retain their chronological distances?

Premonitions is one manifestation of our ongoing engagement with time and temporality. We are interested in how the present instant comes to us striated with other times (real and imagined pasts, possible alternatives to the present, anticipated futures, and loops that connect the three times) and other ways of thinking about time.

What this does is to keep a window in our collective consciousness perpetually open. This helps us avoid the claustrophobia of thinking that just because things are the way they appear now all discussion and questions about how else things might be – how things might have been – and how things might yet become – are void.

As you can see, this is not so much the question of introducing the viewer to an 'arrhythmic' pulse, of creating gaps (that is what happens when you have an arrhythmic heartbeat or arrhythmia in respiration) as it is of creating *contrapuntal* rhythms, of inserting a different pace and temporal signature alongside what you might call the *countdown* of the present. So that just before things are down to zero, somewhere else, some other count is beginning to pulse out a different sense of time. This can free us from the heaviness of inevitability, destiny, and the arrow of time that gets exhausted by travelling

forever in one direction alone.



MB: *We see affinities with modernism here. Is it possible to say modernism lives within the imagination of contemporary art? This modernism incorporates a critique of historicism, the inevitability you mention. Your sense of the ‘contrapuntal’ echoes the principles of Soviet montage. I was thinking of how Lev Manovich looked at the New Media through Vertov’s Man with the Movie Camera. Spatialization dominates the vision of much contemporary critical theory and aesthetic practice. But criticality often seems to return through what we can largely call montage, a typical modernist method, where the vertical and the synchronic continue to play a role. Would you like to talk about this?*

Raqs: Let’s think momentarily of modernism as a four lane highway, let’s say – a ‘national highway’ that claims to take you from A to B, and then let us imagine a few tracks off the high road – that meander alongside, and cross the highway, some-times in a disorderly, zigzag fashion. These tracks are always within hailing distance from the highway, but may not always be visible; sometimes they rise above and run below it. We see our journeys taking place sometimes on the high road, and often, when we need to get to destinations that the highway ignores, on the off-tracks. The off tracks, like most paths that come into existence because people have persistently walked them into being, have been built over peripatetic centuries. And they carry on their surface – the depth, the layers, of centuries of footprints. You could call this a layered, continuing archive of walking, extending itself into the future.

Unlike the highway, where there is never any turning back, except at sanctioned u-turns, the off-tracks are meant for Janus-faced journeymen and journeywomen, (which is what we aspire to be) who know well the ruses of the archive and the contingencies of the present but have also equipped themselves with an open-endedness towards the dilemmas of the future. This means that we don’t necessarily have ‘role models’ to follow, even though we are aware of the velocity and the trajectory of passengers on the high-road.

Our encounter with the dust of other times – modern, non-modern, off-modern – is laden with our sense of their *out-of-joint* presences. Faced with the complexity of these presences, the modernist celebration of unidirectional speed, fueled by the necessity of arousing everyone and herding them towards the future seems archaic and naïve at times.

We are still coming to terms with the turn that compels us to undertake close readings of the peripatetic archive of the off-tracks. This seems to us to be a tendency that we see spreading across the last two decades in many practices, both artistic and otherwise, as a renewal of what it means to ‘sense’ the world, and to render it ‘sensate’ and ‘sensible’. These moves are not direct and unidirectional. They have ambivalences, they are equivocal, as befits the task of moving on a surface as jagged as that of the contemporary world. They resemble the crooked move of the knight in chess. Interestingly, the post-Soviet aesthetician and writer, Svetlana Boym, often speaks of “lateral move of the knight in a game of chess. A detour into some unexplored potentialities of the modern project” to explain what she means by her call to fully inhabit the “off-modern” condition.

This search is not to obliterate the near past. On the contrary it is a detour to revisit it as a site of abandoned routes, of experiments, of imaginations, of thwarted attempts. This pre-occupation of

searching through the archive of the abandoned has also had its moment, particularly in the heyday of early modernism, where it has been played out as a grand idea of the *march of time* expressed through the trope of the rise *and fall* of civilizations. The march of time idea easily lent authority and intellectual and moral legitimacy to the subjugation of peoples and communities all over the world. Our sense of the diachronic is different, what we can see taking place around us (at all times, actually) are – polyphonic searches in the minor scales undertaken by a multitude of actors. These processes add up to something totally contrary to the march of time and the rise and fall of civilizations. Instead of a smooth fabric, they produce a perforated image of time; they spin a web or lattice of time. In fact, they constitute an image of patient time that can hold within itself the plural unfolding of complementary as well as contestant claims on the experience of duration itself.

So, to come back from this detour into the terms of your question – our sense of what you call the contrapuntal does not necessarily ‘echo’ the principles of montage in early Soviet cinema. Instead, perhaps the relationship may be better understood in the terms of what the vocabulary of your suggestion contains implicitly. It is ‘contrapuntal’. An echo is a delayed, and weakened transmission of the same signal, arising due to acoustic resonance. We are neither a delayed, nor a weakened transmission of the signals of montage, or of the early twentieth century avant-gardes. Our moves may constitute at times a counter-signal, a horizontal, diagonal and diachronic interference into the dialectical-epistemological certitude of what you rightly characterize as the vertical and synchronic principles of montage.



MB: *We need to re-affirm this in the face of an academic discourse where ‘art’ has become anathema, where it has been decided that everything is culture. Commitment to art is equated with elitism. South Asian critics believe in this more than others. Is the critical/discursive aspect of your work a conscious reaction to the populism this tendency harbours, a demonstration that critical reflection needs to connect up with creative adventures rather than feed into culture industries? If that is so, how would you deal with the perception that, unlike film or theatre, visual arts still occupy a physical space that finds it difficult becoming public?*

Raqs: A mathematician friend always argues that the value of the work of mathematics in society does not have to demonstrate through its ‘popularity’. Mathematical creativity is valuable regardless of how many (or how few) people understand it because it is generative of new ways of thinking. Can we apply the same criterion to discussion of art? Let us keep this question unanswered, for now. Instead, we could ask, why do we not see art as a condition/possibility for everyone in life?

We live in the time of the twinning of “the industrialization of creativity” and “a meltdown of culture”. Clearly, for the elite there is a loss of confidence in culture as the site of its unquestioned dominance. The parameters of hegemony are now blurred. It is becoming less clear as to how they can undertake cultural “adventures” as they used to be taken. Moreover, the drives to accumulation and expansion are increasingly running counter to the slower rhythm of the cultivation of practitioners. This anxiety runs too in the minds of plantation managers. They get impatient, and thus the Amazon gets cut down everyday.

The word “public” these days has become a placeholder for impatience, profit and consensus, with little interest in the actual formation of public/s. The patronizing – yet hopeful – idea of the public that was first deployed perhaps in the 1920s by early social democracy stands betrayed today. Nowadays the ‘public’ can neither be easily conjured up nor can it be simply constituted. It has escaped its patrons. We see this as an opportunity to rethink the contours of contemporary contestations in public space.

We would prefer to call ourselves, ‘amidst’ and ‘in-relation’ to crowds. The crowd incorporates the possibilities of things bursting open, unpredictably, in unknown directions. It can be an egalitarian space, it can allow for movement. It is also an idea that can be imagined and played with. It can change over time. To be part of a great crowd is an achievement.

Also, we often find ourselves working with and towards the idea of a ‘missing crowd’, a gathering that is yet to collect itself, a crowd that will get constituted.

MB: *It is interesting how you visit your own intellectual development through the real metaphor of technology. The source of the metaphor in this case is a machine that strives to erase the borderline between materials and consciousness. How far do you see your work being made possible by a technological revolution?*

Raqs: It would be a mistake to assume that any machine can erase the borderline between materials and consciousness. We are comfortable with inhabiting a technological milieu, but we are far from being techno-positivists, or techno-determinists of the kind that believe that computers, or digital technology per se – determine the content and shape of culture by their very presence. If that were so, every regional engineering college in this country would be a hub of creativity and cultural innovation. That is far from being the case. The use of computers can instill conformity just as easily as it can inspire creativity. It all depends on what use we make of them.

In the early ‘90s we set up our studio (inside our then living quarters). We had just bought a computer, and they were not as common as they are today. It was a machine that was used by many of our friends and comrades. It was a modest production site for research notes, for writing proposals, projecting scenarios, for producing booklets on work and political economy, essays, criticism, correspondence, catalogues, etc. Among other things, it contained our growing address book and the early eclectic notes for Sarai. This poor, overworked machine went through various disruptions – crashes, version changes, incompatibility issues, upgrades and new software. Through it we made our first forays into list cultures and the internet. It saw us through what must arguably have been the most exciting and foundational decade of our realizing the immensity of the zone of work and ideas that we would go on to inhabit.

During the course of one of the crashes we found that the data in the machine became progressively ‘chewed’ with each successive attempt to re-start the computer. The machine got slower. The complexity of possible commands and actions and even the capacity to effect an upgrade began to falter. What became available to us with each re-start were twisted, broken data threads and snatches of unrealized proposals. Later most of even this got lost and we had to take the hard disk out of the computer. The machine, got gifted to someone else, who kitted it out with a new hard disk. The ‘original’ hard disk itself remained packed away, becoming unusable over time due to the incompatibility of languages. Eventually, it must have found its way to some toxic dump. Almost a decade of work lost in a day.

All we have today from that world are inchoate memories, the beginnings of a few processes, a few completed works and scattered printouts of the twisted thread of productive acts. We are still coming to terms with the fact that the readings, arguments and practices of a decade are now only a bit of illegible digital residue. So, as you can see, we have experienced the fact that time does not move in a smooth linear transition from the past to the future at first hand. The loss of the hard disk meant having to go back in time, into a fragile memory, to reconstruct a damaged thread that connected our past to our (then) present, and through it to the future.

We know that this can happen again, at any moment, and of course, now we try to make back ups. But it has made us sensitive to the concrete fragility of memory (both corporeal and machinic) and to the care that one has to take in the maintenance of the history of one's own practice. Were it to happen again, we would certainly experience a certain *déjà vu*, a feeling of 'we have been in this place before'. But at the same time, we would also feel its opposite, *jamais vu*, the sense that though this is not an unfamiliar experience, it can still feel as strongly as it would if it were to happen for the very first time.

Navigating between the uncannily familiar and the uncannily unfamiliar, which can be two faces of the same experience, means that one has to actually learn how to deal with a temporal breakdown: where all your senses of what was available to you as 'past' and what you have at hand as the 'present' can be up for radical reconfiguration. This can happen during a data crash, or during a time of social upheaval, or during and in the wake of a sudden disaster like an earthquake or a tsunami. In our time, getting grips on this will be a survival skill.

Wherever we have found ourselves in, we have had to figure out a way to re-learn and reconstruct the amplitude of the passage of time. Sometimes, one has to recover in a flash what passes through (or has passed through) the poles of a decade, even a century.

Our intuition is that we are not alone in feeling this way. The people who become our co-narrators, interlocutors and translators are also alert to this incremental and conflicted movement. It is within this flux, around its tilts, crests and troughs that we try to create work, live and have our conversations.



MB: *Your work occupies a space between media, not unlike other events of contemporary art. But there is a desire to make discursive lines occupy the intermediary spaces. One can see from the texts the allusions to contemporary scholarship in social sciences and critical theory. It also permeates the images involved. This is critical reflection. Does art afford you a freedom from the cut and dried frames of criticism, from its habits?*

Raqs: Well, the way in which we have learnt to occupy the space of contemporary art allows us to go beyond either the habits of social science, the familiar tropes of political stance-taking and the affectation of purely formal concerns – hopefully, this is possible to do without having to jettison either the discursive depth of intellectual inquiry, the ethical ground of political commitment or the unpredictability and imaginative plenitude made possible by aesthetic engagements.

Of course, this is not a position we reached automatically. Nor do we claim that we have 'arrived' definitively at the place where we want to be forever. Like everything else, it has a history; it also has a future. Things have changed. Things will change.

Sometime In the late eighties there was a screening of Hartmut Bitomski's film *'The Autobahn of the Third Reich'* at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Delhi. All three of us saw it on the same day, but we did not really know each other then. What we do remember is the feeling of being unmoored by the film's rhetorical stances from the compulsion of being within – or outside – the discourse of any particular discipline.

What was Bitomski doing that we were so taken with? We can remember having several conversations about the space he had create in his mind with this film. It was not the space of facticity, nor was it pure speculation. It was not a slave to evidence or to fancy. He was reading archival images gathered from state and cinema archives, making new connections, using simple juxtaposition to cut through sedimented forms of viewing and yet he was not a slave of the archive.

He was arguing for a critical engagement with the construction plans and forms mobilization of energy and resources for the building of motorways during the 1930s and '40s in Germany and yet he did not have to spell out what he was saying. He was laying the foundations of our being able to 'read' the film, rather than telling us what to think. It was a film that could demonstrate what the concentration of power in the Nazi state meant without having to even refer to the familiar tropes of fascism. It also made them appear chillingly commonplace. So that Nazism could be seen not as an exceptional phenomenon, but as the concentrated instance of a general process.

What impressed us was the confidence with which the film could inhabit multiple modes of knowledge production – the archival and the speculative, use different kinds of rhetoric, move between evidence and its shadow. This was not a work that held out its 'knowledge' on display, on its sleeve as it were. It did not suffer from what we know in social science to be 'citationitis' – the pathology of an anxiety of citation.

Rather, it played a series of subtle moves that displaced the knowledge that its viewer took for granted. This meant that the viewer had to think for him or herself to get to the place where the film pointed towards.



At present, contemporary art allows for such an agility. It is today a space rife with conversation, in ferment, enriched by currents that emanate in diverse disciplines and practices.

The question of freedom is a difficult one. It does allow us to explore differing stances and moves. How free are our moves can only be evaluated in conjunction with other such moves being made by other practitioners in the arts and other fields.

We think that the space of making art today is a generative site. A site that can produce different forms of knowing about the world, in the world. But this form of knowing must not be confused with a mere "evidentiary" mode that sets out to build platforms for the launch and defense of arguments. To know in art is not to know in order to win or lose an argument. It is to access a plenitude that does not care about having to defend the necessary fragility of the contingency of our intellectual positions at any given moment.

MB: *I find myself in agreement that we need to return to a mode where a) we do not produce finished*

messages, and b) we arrive at forms that work on the meeting lines of argument and art, scholarship and creative work. The first takes on some urgency in the face of the emergence of consensual politics and culture – the typical effect of post-ideological projects. In Indian cinema, for instance, you cannot have irresponsible films anymore. Everyone preaches, every theme is an ‘issue’, and crass reformism rules. Criticism of the work is forestalled by consensus on the issue. But when you say art keeps alive a space where one does not have to make statements you remind me of the world-wide resurgence of another kind of cinema where the audience is allowed to make their own images and connections from the order of things on the screen. From Kiarostami to Haneke to Apichatpong, this has emerged as alternative form of speech and politics across a range of styles. Do you think it becomes difficult to imagine this in the Indian context because of a continuing expectation from art of a certain kind of social communication, e.g., ‘development communication’?

Raq: We live in the age of a fractured and confused consensus. We might as well call it ‘dissensus’. Given that “dissensus” is all around us, the agencies that are supposed to maintain consensus seem overburdened and at their wit’s end. To generate consensus of any kind, no matter how short-lived and contingent it may be, these agencies have to work very hard.

You can get a sense of how hard they have to work when you see the angry commentaries around a few recent Supreme Court judgments that have deviated (even if slightly) from the ‘consensual’ script. (See for instance the pious editorial grandstanding and op-ed sabre rattling in a few national dailies on the ‘ideological’ tenor of the Supreme Court judgement in *Nandini Sundar and others v. the State of Chattisgarh* . As if judgements that favour the status quo were free of ‘ideology’.

This disequilibrium is also in the arts. Not everything that is happening in the arts in our milieu is as per the consensual cycle of celebration and mourning of the ‘boom and bust and boom’ scenario. There are gaps opening up. Gaps, that can also be seen as creative opportunities, are opening out in all disciplines and sites, especially as practitioners distance themselves from their prescribed functions as the shapers of “pedagogic” formation or as generators of consensus. There are options and opinions other than the ones in the newspapers, and they are beginning to be seen and heard.

What is it that lends these sites and disciplines the charge and electricity of ruptures and new openings? At certain historical junctures, where the experience of life is harder to smoothen out, things become sharper. In the space of contemporary art, we can see this charge. But it is a fragile thing. It needs custodianship and argumentation. It needs real, and imagined, crowds to mingle in.

Developmentalism is deeply anchored within the terms of a master-pupil relationship, in the transaction mandated between the know-all and the ignoramus. We think it is time to retire this relationship, but we know that it will not go out quietly. It will stay with us, at least for the foreseeable future. It is indeed at the heart of the distribution of time and space (we only need to look around us in our cities). It is the ground on which the superiority of the ‘expert’ is asserted. But its unwillingness to shake from its grounds makes it all the more necessary to propel the charge that will dislodge it; from art into new kinds of cinematic experience, from fragile spaces into wicked ones, from melancholic margins to distributed networks.



MR: Your example of Bitomski’s use of the archives triggers some thoughts. With digital media we are

122. Your example of Duchamp's use of the archives triggers some thoughts. With digital media we are all veering close to your basic techniques, of mining and juxtaposing not only disparate elements but also media. Could you take on the question of politics that I raised once more, keeping this condition in view? Isn't it now necessary to rethink the art- and- politics question as scholarly (research and archiving, for instance) and creative work (digital databases themselves throw up questions for form and aesthetics) veer close to each other, almost by default?

Rags: Absolutely, it is a very good time to rethink the relationship between art, politics, ethics and knowledge. The 'archival turn' that a lot of art making is currently in the process of undertaking emphasizes the crucial role that a deeper philosophical engagement with questions of memory, amnesia, recall and re-inscription will play from now on. This is a time when the distinctions between art and research, between scholarly play and playful scholarship will gradually cease to matter. We look forward to this happening.

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