

A Lexical FAQ
Of / for Raqs Media Collective'

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Rescension

“A re-telling, a word taken to signify the simultaneous existence of different versions of a narrative within oral, and from now onwards, digital cultures ... [T]hrough the encounters between rescensions, ideas spread, travel, and tend toward ubiquity.”

I do not remember exactly when my *orbit* first crossed that of *Sarai*, but I do remember that they crossed, which in the delirium of Web surfing is not insignificant, at least for me. (“*The paths that you take as you travel between the nodes . . . bring you surprises, confirmations and detours and makes you come face to face with the fact of yourself as a forager in the undergrowth of the information economy.*”) Since then, I have learned much from *Raqs Media Collective*, which I freely share as an unraveling rescension of that first encounter, which set off “chains of echoes and resonances at each *node* that trace a path back to the kernel of the idea.”

Sarai

“Traditionally, sarais were also nodes in the communications system and spaces where theatrical entertainments, music, *dervish* dancing, and philosophical disputes could all be staged.”

There are many Sarais. There is Sarai the New Media Initiative, which *Raqs Media Collective* co-conceived. There is Sarai at 29 Rajpur Road in Delhi. There are the influential *Sarai Readers*. There is www.sarai.net, the *site* I first encountered. There is the *Temporary Autonomous Sarai*, which I subsequently commissioned. There are the Sarai-hosted listservs, the research network, Cybermoholla, the Hindi lexical project, the free software. “The Sarai Initiative embraces interests that include cinema history, urban cultures and politics, new media theory, computers, the Internet and software cultures, documentary filmmaking, digital arts and critical cultural practice.”

I think it is, in part, the sheer density of Sarai’s ambitions that initially pulled me and many others into its orbit. But we return because Sarai is a stimulating *node of hospitality* for “practices of new-media nomadism” worthy of the original *caravansarai*.

Raqs Media Collective

Raqs is only and explicitly a co-founder of Sarai, and their work is more than Sarai, but as they write:

“It is interesting to think of Sarai as an integral part of what we 'produce', and hence as an ongoing 'work', which then feeds back into all our other 'work,' but Sarai, is a clear instance of networked authorship, where our distributed network of people, which includes those present at Sarai, and others who are working on various projects and in different nodes within Sarai ... We act within this complex weave, sometimes as catalysts, sometimes as initiators, occasionally as provocateurs, at times as mentors, often as respondents, and sometimes as an attentive and sympathetic but not uncritical audience. It is only in this sense that we could speak of Sarai as our 'work' - as producers, as inhabitants, as users, as public.”

“Raqs is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and means the state that ‘whirling dervishes’ enter into when they whirl,” which is probably a necessary state as Sarai is only a part of what Raqs does. They also have an independent practice that encompasses writing, photography, film, video, new media, theory and criticism, although it is impossible to fully appreciate this practice independently of their work with and on Sarai.

The members of Raqs Media Collective met in film school, but despite the clear media base of their work, what generates it, what motivates it, is what their name as an acronym could stand for: “Rarely Asked QuestionS.”

Site

“Location, both as in the fact of being somewhere, and also, as in the answer to the question of ‘where,’ that ‘somewhere’ is ... [M]arking a *site* as an address calls for the drawing up of relations between a location and the world.”

Much is made of the fact that Raqs are Indian artists based in Delhi. And a work such as *28°28' N / 77°15' E:: 2001-2002: An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life in Delhi*, shown at Documenta XI does locate itself in that city. Yet, while acknowledging an “asymmetry of ignorance” (“*We, on the fringes of the global space, know more about the global space than those who are at its core know about us*”), Raqs generally shun a worldview of center and periphery. “The notion of a center assumes that there is one globality. . . . The moment one desires, or admits to, disparate, intersecting, chaotic wills to globality, the notion of a center, and with it of peripheries, loses any meaning.” Theirs is a relational universe of nodes and orbits and trajectory and velocity.

Ubiquity

“Everywhere-ness. The propensity of a *meme* towards ubiquity increases with every iteration. . . . Each *rescension*, carries into its own trajectory . . . the encounters between *rescensions*, ideas spread, travel and tend towards *ubiquity*. That which is everywhere is difficult to censor.”

Access

“To be present, to have the ability, the key, to *decode* a signal, to open doors, to be able to download/upload on to any system of signs and signals - be it the Internet, a book, an art work, or a dinner party. There can be no excess of *access*.”

Raqs does not play up so-called ‘digital divide’ issues. When I asked them about network access in India as, say, the United States. But there is widespread access through shared resources such as cyber cafés, universities, or at places like Sarai. This is not to say that there aren’t significant resource and infrastructure issues, but I think they imagine a future that would not undermine a social benefit—conviviality, hospitality, communality—for the sake of individual consumption.

Access is a code issue, including the code of legal regulations (“*Entry Permitted. Access Denied.*” reads one of the stickers Raqs deployed throughout Kassel during Documenta XI), business practices, and social conventions. Access is critical for an open culture where doors are not shut to participation. For Raqs, access to code “connotes community, a community of ‘encoders, decoders and *code* sharers.” What is the benefit—or rather what is the cost—if everyone has access to computers for which they do not have access to the underlying code?

OPUS

OPUS is not just another work. It is an Open Platform for Unlimited Signification. Raqs does not tend to think small. For OPUS, they worked with collaborators at the Sarai media lab to create software that is an experimental site for many of their most passionate convictions. Free software. “Software whose source code is open and available for scrutiny, exploration, distribution and modification.” Digital commons. “Software that is designed expressly to reconcile the imperative of authorship with the demands of a community of creation.” The kernel of an idea.

Functionally, OPUS is a platform that allows for the uploading and downloading of media objects: text, images, video, audio. Users can download material, modify it, and re-upload it with additional keywording. OPUS automatically tracks both the genealogy, so to speak, of these modifications, and the keywords create an emergent classification system that begins to create connections between different families of objects.

Conceptually, the kernel of the idea that makes *OPUS* distinct from just another file-sharing system and “invites modification, extrapolation and interpretation, by its very presence,” is the underlying notion of *rescension*, which in this context is a subversive challenge not just to intellectual property regimes but also to the very hierarchy of

derivation. “The concept of *rescension* is contraindicative of the notion of hierarchy. A *rescension* cannot be an improvement, nor can it connote a diminishing of value. A *rescension* is that version which does not act as a replacement for any other configuration of its constitutive materials.”

Nomadic

“Culture is something that never respects borders and territories. It is infectious, nomadic, and volatile.”

In an online conversation on “translocations” between Raqs, myself, Gunalan Nadarajan, and curator Yukiko Shikata, there was much discussion regarding the “limits of nomadic strategies” because “there is a tendency for such strategies not to have a life after their initial interventions and effects” [Guna]. Raqs, however, suggested that “the nomad walks the same paths between places,” and that “this permanence requires that there be stable institutions of hospitality for practices of nomadism.”

Nodes

“Any structure that is composed of concentrated masses of materials which act as junction points for the branching out of extensible parts of the overall system may be described as nodal ... Each node is ultimately a direct *rescension* of at least one other node in the system.”

Temporary Autonomous Sarai

As a curator of new media at the Walker Art Center, arguably at the time a stable institution of hospitality for art practices, I was interested in whether the forms and functions of the sarai could hack into the codecs of the white-cube institution as at least a temporary site of hospitality for the relational aesthetics of new media work.

In 2002, the Walker commissioned a collaboration between Raqs Media Collective and Atelier Bow Wow, a Tokyo-based architectural studio formed in 1992 by Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima. Atelier Bow-Wow are proponents of what they have named *da-me*, or no-good, architecture. Multilayered structures with varied uses (underpass + cinema + bar + barbershop + store, for example), these buildings epitomize a new creative, adaptive aesthetic—not unrelated to the idea of the sarai.

The resulting “architecture for temporary autonomous sarai,” was a remarkable structure that inverted the permanence of the sarai along nomadic routes into an architecture, which could pack into itself and be transported along the trade routes of culture to be deployed as a semi-autonomous site of hospitality for the new media works displayed in the TAS.

Raqs, who co-conceived the TAS in a joint residency with Atelier Bow Wow, underscored their medium-independence with this project and the *portability* (“the feature of a system or work that best describes its ability to move quickly through different spaces and mediums.”) of OPUS. A major feature of the TAS was a physical rescension of OPUS. Lining the edges of the structure were several thousand “files”—sheets of printed text related to the open source movement. Visitors were encouraged to remove these files, comment on or otherwise modify them, and replace them in a different order, creating their own rescension of the OPUS contents.

Information

“You are either in the hemisphere of joy or in the latitudes of anxiety, when you come face to face with the glut of information.”

For Raqs there is a visceral pleasure in the quotidian.

“I am a prisoner of phone booths. STD/ISD/PCO/FAX/Xerox by Japanese machine, booths. I am enthralled by their darkened glass panes, stenciled signage, and plastic flowers, the late hours they keep, and the stories that gather on their wallpapers. Like an idiot hungry for tales of travelers who idled in the sarais of the Delhi sultanate, I waste my time in the phone booths of 90's New Delhi. Even when I have nothing to say and no one to call.”

Which is always balanced by a clear-eyed recognition of how the world really is and what needs to be done about it.

“It is time [to begin] paying serious attention to the fact that just as the history of the telegraph in India actually made a global communication network possible, the present and immediate future of new media practices on a day to day level in India, and in South Asia will have a tremendous impact on the future of new media culture in general.”

No-Des

All of “this”—the probing, knowledgeable, curious conversation that is Raqs’ *modus operandi*, the stable site of hospitality for nomadic practices that is Sarai, the numerous works produced by Raqs Media Collective and their network of collaborators—comes together engrossingly in a new project, *No_Des*.

“*Nodes*, when written, perhaps erroneously, as ‘*no-des*’ gives rise to an intriguing hybrid English/Eastern-Hindi neologism, a companion to the old words - ‘*des*’, and ‘*par-des*’. ‘*Des*’ (in some eastern dialects of Hindi, spoken by many migrants to Delhi) is simply homeland or native place; ‘*pardes*’ suggests exile, and an alien land. ‘*No_des*’ is that *site* or way of

being, in '*des*' or in '*par-des*', where territory and anxieties about belonging, don't go hand in hand. *Nodes* in a digital domain are *No_des*."

In a way, No_Des reminds me of Heath Bunting's classic "Own, Be Owned or Remain Invisible"². Both use simple hyperlinking from a similarly brief journalistic text to characterize their view of the networks—at least at the time. But whereas Bunting's work is formally efficient, Raqs' No_des is a riot of connections that have been selected using wetware, not an algorithm. "The Network of No_des uses driftwood from web searches, messages in data bottles, re-mixed fragments of Hindi and Bengali film scenes and research notes from Sarai's ongoing exploration of new media street culture in Delhi to present an array of associational possibilities." From the story of a "Lightening Raid in a Basement," the reader is taken from worldwide statistics on the death penalty to biographical mise-en-scènes of a key psychotic source for the Oxford English Dictionary to "the trinity of freedom for infinite justice" to a "remix" of Spiderman in the guise of Pavitra Pravakar. As Raqs write:

"One thing leads to another, a story fills a space in a song, and a piece of code gathers patches. And in time a re-purposed remixed media work is released into the peer-to-peer network called conversation."

This is true of No_Des, and it is true of Raqs as a networked artist collaborative, and it is true of Sarai as both a physical site and a virtual node. Welcome to the conversation. Contribute to the rescension.

(2004)

¹ All of the text in quotations is taken from Raqs's own writings on the Sarai website (<http://www.sarai.net>), as part of "Translocations: A Conversation" (<http://latitudes.walkerart.org/texts/texts.wac?id=295>), "A Concise Lexicon of / for the Digital Commons" (<http://www.sarai.net/compositions/texts/works/lexicon.htm>), and in texts accompanying their work, such as *No_des*, or in email correspondence with the author.

² Heath Bunting, "Own, Be Owned Or Remain Invisible".