

Raqs Media Collective: Building Sight

Working with an extended family of collaborators, Raqs Media Collective has produced some of the more interesting and least predictable art to come out of the Indian subcontinent in recent years. Although they only began to function as contemporary artists in 2000 with the foundation of Sarai Media Lab at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, the collective has been around since 1991 when core members Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta graduated from film school together.

The influence of documentary filmmaking remains strong as a combination of visual and intellectual investigation has formed a consistent part of their oeuvre, but Raqs have resolutely refused to allow their practice to be pinned down. Various 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, and from an early stage 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' recent exhibition in London should have been held at Waterman's 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, Waterman's new media curator who cleverly resolved the constraints of showing multiple video works in a small gallery space.

The cacophony of sound and flickering of projected images that envelop the visitor seem 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 suggests, builds cumulatively to focus on a coherent set of issues and concerns. Most obvious is the Indian city, and in particular their native Delhi. The sense of a fragmentary vision incrementally expanding is continually present in Raqs work in both an artistic and curatorial sense.

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

Popular resistance is a consistent theme in Raqs work. Sanjay Kak's *The dispute at the dam site* (2006) utilises 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 shows a crowd of protesters who have taken

over the dam site and an almost comical confrontation with a local bureaucrat who tries to intercede.

Kak's film is the only piece in the show deviating from a direct examination of the city but the same interest in the tensions arising from man's constant interference with the land in the interest of development and progress is clearly present in Ruchir Joshi's video *Gurgaon giraffe*. Here a mechanical digger scoops earth from a huge building site in this thrusting, fast growing Delhi suburb, the blurred focus of the video transforms the machine into a massive animal caught in a strange feeding ritual.

In a number of the works the people of the city are 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 focuses on the hands of passengers as they grasp for the straps and bars in one of the city's crowded suburban trains. These detached digits taking on a life of their own as they grapple for something to hold on to in the claustrophobic crush of the carriage.

The *Ectropy index* (2005) an HTML-based audio and visual work by the Sarai Media Lab reflects most directly the collective's affinity to new media practice 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, explores forms of categorisation and control in the urban realm, ranging from maps to criminal records.

One of a dizzying number of projects nurtured under the Raqs umbrella, Cybermohalla consists of three media labs in working class districts in Delhi in which local people are encouraged to participate in a creative dialogue, responding to their urban surroundings. *A wall and a sofa* (2001-5) by Cybermohalla Ensemble, sees an alleyway close to the Dakshinpuri lab transformed by painting a rough stone bench to resemble an ornate sofa. Rendered in time lapse film, this intervention becomes the backdrop for some poignant activity as locals pass by and take a seat.

Raqs demand engagement from the viewer— sadly more than is normally expected in our increasingly attention-deficit culture. It may not be everyone who will take the time to get the full impact of their work. *Building Sight* is an extremely thought provoking, indeed powerful show, which, as its name suggests, builds cumulatively to focus on a coherent set of issues and concerns. While it functions on many different levels, however, it still assumes an understanding of Indian issues which many visitors to Waterman's will not have had. The artists are clearly aware of this and have taken on a more vernacular approach in their exhibition currently on show at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh (until January 20, 2008), in which many of the works deal with the issues of this American steel manufacturing city.

Raqs make art that is refreshingly political in an age of superficiality and gloss. Their collaborative ethos, multi-disciplinary practice, and refusal to be constrained by the limitations of specialised authorship give strength to their vision, but there remains 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 can seem forbidding to the uninitiated.

Raqs will co-curate next year's Manifesta European Biennial for Contemporary Art in Northern Italy (19 July - 2 November 2008) and are clearly on the cusp of international recognition that they certainly deserve. It will be interesting to see how they respond to success and the concurrent pressures to engage with the commercial art world. On the strength of *Building Sight* they are mining a rich vein and their politically engaged art seems to be increasingly fashionable. No doubt they will continue to produce powerful and challenging work.