

## **Additions, Subtractions: On Collectives and Collectivities**

Raqs Media Collective

### **1. On Counting**

In the preface to the first, 1888, edition of *Was Sind und Was Sollen die Zahlen* (The Nature and Meaning of Numbers), Franz Dedekind the Mathematician-Philosopher says: "ἀειὸς ὁ ἀνθρώπος ἀριθμητίζει" (Aei O Anthropos Arithmetozoi) "Man is always Counting".

Whenever we count, we end up with additions, with something more than a singularity. And then we add additions together. We couple; we multiply. When we look at a singularity long enough, then, up close, things begin to fall away from the unit's seemingly monadic sovereignty. Subtraction and division yield a carnival of decimals, a rebellion of fractions. Even the solitude of one is made up of one thirds and halves and quarters and other, forever other, infinities.

If man is always counting – adding, subtracting, figuring, accounting – it is because nothing is ever really one thing. No one is alone. Everything, everyone has a shadow, a past, a future, a hidden facet, something invisible, forgotten, as yet uncounted, still waiting to be figured, still emerging. We wax; we wane. We add years to our lives, we come to the end of our days. We are many, our name is legion, and sometimes we are divided within our selves, or possessed by more things than we can know.

To say that something is just what it is and no more is almost as good as saying that it is nothing at all. Everything changes in order to persist. And when things change, they become more, or less. They deliver themselves to their own plenitude, to their own divisions.

We are all numbers today. A datum, a statistic, a measure. How many are we? How much of ourselves are we? How deficient or how much in excess are we? How liquid, how solvent, how current? How prolific? How dense, deep and dubious are we? What are we worth? How much do we weigh in with the world? What discount do we offer on ourselves? What is our rank, the percentage of our takings? How high is our perch, how deep our abyss, how shallow our grave?

All it takes to recognize a collectivity for what it is consists in counting and then considering the relationships between the numbers that make up a constellation. Looked at this way, we have to ask, what or who is not an accumulation, a collectivity? Whose name is not legion?

But there is a world of differences between a collectivity and a collective. A collectivity is a fact; a collective is a disposition - a way of being or doing things. Facts are things; dispositions are ways of thinking about the thing-ness of a fact. And as is usually the case with dispositions, a collective is something that a collectivity chooses for itself to be. In that sense, a collective is a marker of a certain degree of self consciousness that enables an entity (or entities) to recognize their divided and /

or multiplied, constituted, prolific being.

A collective is the history and the future of the conversation that a collectivity has with itself. Not every collectivity chooses to speak. Not every collectivity can speak, or listen to itself. And those that do speak don't always talk within themselves, or to each other. Those that do talk within themselves, or to each other, stand the chance of becoming collectives, provided they enjoy the terms of their talking. Provided they get used even to listening to their silences.

## **2. Collectives and Art: Why not to paint by numbers**

What does it mean for a collective to produce art? Or curate?

The making of a collective art practice can never be reduced to the division and allocation of a number of pre-determined set of tasks, which are distributed simply because of reasons of their volume and the efficiencies of scale that can be achieved by putting more than one pair of hands to work. Collective art practices flounder when, metaphorically speaking, one person paints red in all the slots marked with the number for red, and others do the same for other colours and other numbers. To be an artists' collective, or a curatorial collective, is precisely not to paint by numbers.

We are a collective of three people who began thinking, working and making things together almost twenty years ago. The conversation that transformed our collectivity into a collective is still continuing, but it began with small, modest acts of friendship and solidarity. A plugging into each other's nervous systems by passing a book from one hand to another. The simple fact of writing in each other's notebooks, watching films together or wondering what we would do if we could work together. Disagreeing, when necessary, and agreeing, whenever possible. And by continuing to know that agreements and disagreements did not cancel each other out in a zero-sum game, but spiralled instead to new levels of connectedness.

Connectedness meant conversation. A great deal of conversation. The space and matrix of our conversation is our real studio, as well as the actual author of our work. Here, we lay the foundations of long-term investigations. These investigations are our responses to the realities we confront on a daily basis, both in Delhi and on our journeys elsewhere. We live densely networked lives, and currents and impulses from all sorts of sources constantly enter our consciousness and then refuse to leave until they have been accounted for. They could be balance sheets of mineral prospecting companies, a photograph taken while travelling, parables and allegories in dead languages, a chance conversation with a taxi driver, a sudden email or letter from a long-lost friend, a posting in a discussion list or blog, mathematical formulae, a memory of the shared viewing of a film, footnotes in the so called "war against terror", philosophical treatises, medical text books and boxes of photographs and documents in archives scattered across the world. In today's world, who does not contain such multitudes?

In the course of being each other's shadow, we became each other's databases, leaning on each other's memories, multiplying, amplifying and anchoring the things we could imagine by sharing our dreams, our speculations and our curiosities.

Most importantly, when we began testing our solidarities in the rough waters of actual practice it meant understanding that the genesis and development of an idea or a work takes place not within the sealed, hermetic spaces of our three individual consciousnesses, but at the intersection of all our communications to each other. The history of every work that we make is traceable to a series of moves made in messages. Everything that we work with is either found, fished or floated in the current of our constant chatter and in the things understood in silences and incomplete sentences.

It is not as if the ball of an idea, be it an image, a fragment of text, a sketch or a set of instructions, or a curatorial proposition, once chucked by any one of our three minds is automatically destined to travel, as if in relay, in the direction charted for it by the person who first threw it. The interception of the idea, and the turn that may be given to it once it is caught while it courses the world between our hard drives, may change the very direction of its flight altogether. Things may bounce back and forth for a long time, or they may acquire spins and velocities that take them into completely unexpected orbits.

This can continue until the ball comes to rest in a momentary pause in the game. This pause is often the moment when we find that a work is at a stage when it is more or less ready to slide into the world outside our hard drives. Usually this is an artwork; sometimes it is an exhibition that we have curated.

This changes the way we look at the creative process. A work (or an exhibition) is no longer the concrete materialization of an ideal-typical form conceived in the mind of any one person in the collective. Rather, the work begins to occur when the idea it germinated in meets its interlocutory challenges and responses. The materialization of the work, rather than concretizing and containing authorship within an embodied person, disperses it into the history of the network of communications that went into its making. In that sense our practice, and our collective, is not so much an accretion of three individuals and their biographies as it is the lattice made out of the communicative acts between them.

We are sometimes asked who does what in the collective, and the simple answer is that we do not believe in a formal division of labour, or in the individual ownership of ideas. It was to resist the particularly deathly alienation of creative work in the media industry based on a fetish of 'individual' labour that we forged a collective practice that guaranteed our creative autonomy.

It is more important for us to think of whether an idea or an image has strength and contribute to an argument that we are working on than to worry about who originated the idea. Each of us has particular interests, skills and propensities, (and these are not rigid or mutually exclusive) but it is in the playing together of these

elements that our work gets produced. And a lot of things are cooked in the process of research, in which the alloys that make the final renditions are realized. Research for us is essentially a dialogic process. We bring different things to the table, and then work through a process of seeing how they speak to each other.

We also work a lot with other people - curators, artists, academics, writers, designers, editors, researchers, architects and performers. We enjoy this process and learn from these interactions. They open out new areas of thinking and bring new energies into our work. They change and enlarge the neighbourhood of our thought and practice

### **3. Curating Collectively for Manifesta 7**

Our collective's practice is built on an enduring process of conversation. In curating Manifesta we were enlarging the ambit of that conversation, inviting a host of new interlocutors to respond to us. An exhibition can be seen as a design conceived by a single intelligence, or it can be seen as that which emerges and is built as a result of a series of exchanges between different intelligences. We think our curatorial framework approaches the second model.

For 'The Rest of Now', the exhibition we curated at Bolzano/Bozen for Manifesta 7 in 2008, we constituted an expanded curatorial collegiate of three people: Anders Kreuger, curator based in Lund and professor at the Malmö Academy, Nikolaus Hirsch, architect based in Frankfurt, and Graham Harwood, artist and new media practitioner based in Southend-on-Sea.

Anders, Nikolaus and Graham were invited to contribute work to the show as artists, but also to respond to our curatorial ideas. So in a sense, we were enlarging the collective horizon of the curatorial signature, even as we were prepared, as Raqs to take authorial responsibility for that very invitation. This enlargement did not bring any anxiety of dissolution in its wake, primarily because we are habituated to working as a collective.

Yet another interlocutory layer was added when Denis Isaia, our curatorial assistant, entered the scene. We worked in conversation with Denis to create a fold within the exhibition, a program called 'Tabula Rasa', which functioned as a conceptual vestibule located within an actual architectural annexure to the ex-Alumix building (the venue), between the territory of the exhibition and its outside. It had a door leading into the exhibition, and another door leading away from it, which meant that yet another collection of situations and practices could attach themselves to the primary axis of the curated exhibition, even as they retained their positional autonomy.

Finally, Manifesta 7 featured another orbit made up of curatorial intersections. This was 'Scenarios', a scenography for the vacant fortress at Franzenfeste, which became the fourth site of Manifesta 7. Here, the three curatorial units – us (Raqs), Anselm Franke & Hila Peleg, and Adam Budak – founded a space for listening and consideration based on our conversations with each other. What was interesting

about this experience was not that it meant an accretion of our individual practices; rather, the desire to experience a common ground led each of us, individually and together, to explore a form of almost totally dematerialized exhibition-making that none of us had previous experience of, or confidence in. It was as if the necessity to find a common vocabulary for curatorial practice required all of us to create a new language. That this experiment did not end in the stone walls of the fortress turning into a tower of Babel, despite the fact that they did end up speaking in tongues, says something about the happy surprise that collectivity can conjure on its way to finding, even if momentarily, a collective practice.

#### **4.Arithmetic and Geometry**

To be a collective it is not enough to simply understand the arithmetic of being more than one. Alain Badiou, in *On Number and Numbers* asks, "Isn't another idea of number necessary in order for us to turn thought back against the despotism of number, in order that the subject might be subtracted from it?"

What can this 'other idea of number' be?

What is required is the everyday working through of a geometry of relationship such that the 'work' happens in the angles formed by the linking of the arms of a figure. In our specific case, this necessarily produces a triangulation which can be acute, oblique or equilateral, depending on the circumstances. Any cones of any triangle can find mooring in any space that is prepared to receive their pointedness. Triangles can nest in figures shaped to receive them. Collectives can find anchorage in collectivities larger than themselves.

The data sets that astronomers work with at present are so dense that they require collaborative linkages between various capabilities and locations for us to even begin to make sense of them. However, this collaborative imperative does not preclude the possibility of individual acuteness and insight around the same material.

The same could be said about the times we live in. The complexity of contemporaneity is so multifaceted that we need a vast array of practices and sensibilities to be in sustained dialogue with each other in order to even begin making sense of where we are in culture today.

This balance between a collaborative engagement as well as an alertness to a singular sensibility is what we strive for in our practice. We see this as a form of travel. As in all such journeys, you strike up conversations with travellers that continue, even as paths fork, diverge, and intersect. Our 'work' in the Raqs collective grows in this way. The first set of conversations is between the three of us, and then there is an expanded field of conversations, with many forking paths, with fellow travellers and guests.

There is, however, in the end, nothing special or charmed about collective practice. Accountants and architects offices, musicians bands, designers studios, scientific

laboratories, monasteries and lawyers firms are all collectives that go about their business without necessarily romanticising, or being over-determined by their collective dispositions. Their dispositions rely more on the day-to-day tending of their practices rather than the premature declarations of manifestos of collective intent.

The figure of the individuated artist and the solitary intellectual, which is actually just a momentary blip in the long human history of divided practices and dialogic forms of thought, may have prevented a consciousness about the space of art-making as a commons from emerging in a fulsome manner. But as artists, intellectuals and curators go about forging hitherto unimagined geometries with their peers, both within and outside the art world, the collective disposition for doing things together with others, (which is in any case the normal, default mode in which humanity acts), will eventually overtake the solipsistic turn that art and intellectual life took under pressure from a generalized alienation of human beings from the ground of their sociality. As this process gathers its own momentum, and as we get used to our own plenitude, we will begin to be surprised at the lonesome spiritual frugality of the life of the solitary artist and the curator alone in his or her exhibition.

That day, happily, is not far. We can tell by counting.