

An Ephemeris, Corrected for the Longitudes of Tomorrow :

Speculations on the Orbit and Motion of Objects and Processes
in Contemporary Art, today, and tomorrow.

Raqs Media Collective

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1. Telescope and the Shape of Time Reconsidered

Step back, for a moment, to take in the longer, larger view. Telescope outwards from the distracting family resemblances between artifacts, styles and signatures, between sundry conditions pre-and-post, and consider instead, the motions of prime objects and the constellations around them. Think of planets, the concordances and discordances of moons and stars, the expansion of galaxies, the explosive contractions of dying suns.

Assume, that art is the universe, and art history a sub-branch of astronomy, (for what is art but the population of the universe with new matter for its consideration). Detach yourself, momentarily, from the mothership of art history. Step out for a spacewalk.

George Kubler (about whom we just heard) talks a lot about stars and astrophysics in what is for us a prescient text.

No, we are not talking about the *Shape of Time*.

The essay we refer to, (which we are sure most of you would be familiar with) is '*The Shape of Time - Reconsidered*' - a response written by Kubler, published in *Perspecta*, 1982, answering critics of '*The Shape of Time*' twenty years after its publication disturbed the discipline of Art History (and delighted artists, for instance Robert Smithson) with its outlandish suggestions about prime

objects, aesthetic fatigue and fast and slow happenings.

Speaking of 'prime objects', the shadowy prefigurations in artists' minds of the things they make, Kubler says,

In theory, being originally in the maker's mind, no prime object exists in its pristine state. They all have been altered in actuality, and they suffer the accidents of time, being known only by indirection, like stars vanishing in supernova explosions.

This sounds like astrophysics, which is a field thickly populated with radical theories that are beyond proof. Black holes were first named by Archibald Wheeler in 1973. These are small, super-dense stellar corpses, which destroy matter by gravitational dissolution, removing information from the universe. Their opposites, however, are white holes, from which new matter erupts, endowed with color, texture, and chemical composition.

Their existence as mathematical creatures, or objects, was first postulated in 1964, and today white holes are regarded as time-reversed black holes, renewing the universe, although none has ever been registered by observation, however indirect. They are prefigured, however, in the Manichaeian universe of light springing from darkness.

Thus, my idea about prime objects is less mathematical and more historical than white holes, but, like them, prime objects may be constructs necessary to the processes which they may have originated.

If an art historian like Kubler can take recourse to a speculative astronomy to talk about art history, then we certainly can take recourse to the convenient cover of art practice to talk about astronomy. Our constructs, our prime objects, may or may not be useful to your discipline, but we array them for your consideration, perhaps in order for you to be entertained by the thought of speculating about processes that may yet originate; as a diversion at the end of a long and busy conference day, perhaps as metaphors with which to think, with a little levity, about the grave questions of the local and the global, of time, timeliness and contemporaneity, of anteriors and posteriors to this or that historical moment.

So here, in the deadly serious yet light-hearted spirit of Kubler's reconsideration of the Shape of Time, is our ephemeris, our navigation chart through the art history to come. Here, science fiction meets art history, and through this marriage of portmanteau expressions, perhaps a new fiction and an old artifice is born.

Signs of Life

But first, before lift off, a brief, sobering report from one who has already been there. A cosmonaut reads from his log book.

“How do we know signs of life when we see them?”

How do we know whether things are changing quickly, or slowly, or not at all? What kind of patience does a historian require to be able to slow things down in his or her mind, so that some change is visible, or what kind of energy does it take to speeden up the tempo of observation such that things can be observed to be in flux, while and before they completely change.

At the end of the First World War, two sets of soldiers came back from the same battlefields with two kinds of responses. European soldiers apparently lapsed into silence, and so, as Walter Benjamin declares so poignantly in his essay on ‘The Storyteller’, stories and story telling died in the wake of their return. A bunch of letters written by Indian soldiers fighting in allied armies in Europe tell a different story. They were held back by military censors, and that is how, as jottings in a censors file, they become available to the historian as evidence. Here are a few of these fragments.

Mahendra Lal Verma to Lali Kaliwati, Hindu Girls School, Lucknow

17th April, 1916, Field Post Office 40, France

With this letter I am enclosing a picture card showing the death of an English girl. You will notice the man in the picture with the young woman lying senseless on the ground in front of him. She was a nurse in Belgium and used to attend to the wounded.

She was charged with the crime of helping English soldiers escape to England via the Netherlands, and was sentenced to death. She fainted, and the soldiers refused to fire on her body. Then the officer blew her brains out with a revolver

Mir Shamshad Ali to Syed Karamat Ali Saheb, Delhi

May 1916

Meerut Cavalry Brigade, France

I sent you a photo that was taken in April 1916. Compare it with the photo that was taken in the April of last year. Judge for yourself whether what I write is true or false.

Ghulam Rasool Khan to his father Mohammad Nawaz Khan, Aurungabad

24th May, 1916, Secundrabad Cavalry Brigade, France.

You say the photo is a useless thing, but for me it is worth all the money I possess. I don't see you in my dreams and for this reason it is a comfort to gaze at you in your picture.

Yalait Khan to Mohakam ud Din

Chakwal, Jhelum District, Punjab

26th April, 1916. Sialkot Cavalry Brigade, France

We are forbidden to write particulars about the war. Moreover, what is one to write? If the fighting were confined to one spot, one could give details, but this war is spread over the whole world, no part of the world can escape from it.

Sabib Khan to his brother Abdullah Khan,

112th Cavalry, Shabdara, Swat, North West Frontier Province

15th March, 1915

Meerut Division Signalling Compnay, France

If I come back alive. When I come back to India, I will rehearse to you the whole story, from beginning to end. Like a book of the Arabian Nights.

The silent witness and the would-be narrator of the Arabian nights are both correspondents of a world at war. Neither silence nor loquaciousness, by themselves, define the global moment after the First World War. The terms are reversed at the end of the forties. The enormity of the violence that follows in the wake of the partition of India produces a generation of silent witnesses. The children of the soldiers who wanted to retell the First World War as the Arabian nights fell silent in the aftermath of a more proximate slaughter. We say this only to speak of the difficulty of adjudicating what is the correct and legitimate response to a global moment.

In one place, one kind of people find speech, in another place and another time, the same people choose silence. We all sense our times, but we do not sense them in the same way. The question of an appropriate artistic response cannot be reduced to an equivalence either to space or time, distance or proximity, nor even to duration or intensity of an experience. Space and time act on our minds, our eyes, our dreams, our memories, our hands, in strange and folded ways. What is global is the distribution of the chances that different places will speak to different people at different times. Nothing comes from just one place; nothing comes from just one time.

Even in the course of a century, the pressure of stories accumulates across continents and decades and erupts in the unlikeliest of places.

The Capital of Accumulation: Matrix of Interwoven Histories

When work on researching the project that would culminate in our recent work 'The Capital of Accumulation' began, all that was available was a supposition, a set of bare facts and a hunch. There was a propositional cavity, an event shaped hole, that needed filling in.

The proposition was that our reading of Rosa Luxemburg's legacy would have something meaningful to say about the contemporary dynamics of capital in cities like Mumbai, Berlin and Warsaw. The bare facts were few, sketchy and not very well connected: that Rosa Luxemburg spent her life in Warsaw and Berlin; that Berlin and Bombay shared a tenuous history through the

transcontinental movement of people who worked in the early film industry; that Berlin, Bombay and Warsaw were all cities shaped by the cataclysmic forces of the twentieth century; and that our library had an eccentric twenty-year old abridged edition of Rosa Luxemburg's "The Accumulation of Capital" published by a worker's political self-education group in Faridabad, at the outskirts of Delhi. The hunch was that somewhere in Warsaw there was an abandoned industrial facility named after Rosa Luxemburg. This is all that there was, to begin with.

Throwing fragments together repeatedly, as if they were moves in a long-winded dice game, and watching to see what patterns would form when the dice fell was the first step in research. Out of this game emerged the figure of Luxme Sorabgur, a might-have-been-latter day imaginary interlocutor to Rosa Luxemburg, the author of a book that re-arranged the terms of reference of the Capital of Accumulation to bring them in line with the realities of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The second step lay in determining that there was in fact a gigantic abandoned factory in Warsaw's industrial district called the Rosa Luxemburg Electric Light Bulb Factory. Once this was known, it became imperative, in a sense, to undertake a reading of the Faridabad edition of the 'Accumulation of Capital' in the ruins of the Rosa Luxemburg Electric Light Bulb Factory in Warsaw.

The third step occurred through a set of uncanny coincidences. Through the discovery of the very specific event shaped hole of this work. Even as preliminary investigations in the early summer of 2009 got underway - researching the life and death of Rosa Luxemburg, marvelling at her interests in botany and birds - word came of a forensic analyst, Dr. Martin Tsokos at the Charité Hospital in Berlin, who was claiming that it was likely that a hitherto anonymous decapitated and preserved cadaver kept as a teaching specimen in a vitrine in the Charité morgue may well be the actual remains of Luxemburg herself. Here, staring us in the face, was a speculation that somehow seemed to embody a strangely corporeal analogy to the question of the 'missing body' left in the wake of the accumulation of capital. Our interest in one 'missing body' had led us to another. And it was possible that

the second 'missing body' was the remains of the author of the first.

Tsokos based his speculations on the rumour that 'Luxemburg had never left the building' which had been passed down generations of students and doctors at the Charité. He claimed that the body that had in fact been buried (and which in turn had since disappeared, after the desecration of Luxemburg's grave by the Nazis) was in fact not Luxemburg's, but of another anonymous drowned woman. He suspected that the body in his custody at the Charité had a much greater resemblance to what is known about Luxemburg's physique and posture from photographs and anecdotal sources. He was joined in his quest by a historian passionately devoted to Luxemburg's political legacy, Dr. Jurgen Schuhtrumpf, who, when he met us in Berlin, would neither deny, nor confirm Tsokos' speculations, but did show us slides of Rosa Luxemburg's herbarium - her meticulous collection of plants undertaken during prison sentences, which was now being considered as a possible repository of residual DNA from her person.

The herbarium, which had travelled across continents before finally coming to rest, to its current location in the Polish State Archives was tracked down. The herbariums did not yield any materials for DNA matches, but looking at them, and handling them, opened a window to a different Rosa Luxemburg. Here was a woman passionate about plants, birds, animals and nature, who could write movingly of an animal's pain, or wonder at the migration of birds.

While standing in the spot where a plaque marks her assassination by the Landwehrkanal in Berlin, we realized how close we were to the zoo. It seemed suggestive that the only notional witnesses to Luxemburg's last moments on the night of January 15th in 1919 would have been the animals in the nearby Berlin zoo. We had to find a voice for them. A voice which could allude to her anger at the way in which Capital denudes and destroys nature. She wrote a letter from Wroclaw prison agonizing at the way in which an injured Rumanian ox was being pushed beyond its capacity by its cruel master. Those words became the basis of the chorus spoken by the animals of the Berlin zoo in memory of the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg in the 'Capital of Accumulation'.

And thus, suddenly there occurred the appearance of much more than a hitherto missing body. It was anecdotally known to us that Rosa Luxemburg, like many early twentieth century intellectuals, regardless of her personally sceptical philosophical orientation, would occasionally amuse and entertain herself and her companions with planchettes and self-consciously ironic forays into the demi-monde of mediums and contact with the deceased. In a strange twist of circumstances, it was beginning to appear as if by embarking on this project this collective had itself turned into trinity of mediums who would occasionally receive uncanny bursts of insight and communications from Luxemburg, relayed through the entirely imagined medium of Luxme Sorabgur, who was found embodied in the form of a sari-clad statue of an Indian woman in the precincts of the Salon of Congresses in the Palace of Science and Culture in Warsaw. Rosa Luxemburg turned up to tease us in Berlin, and Luxme Sorabgur stood in front of us, of all places, in Warsaw. Somewhere around this time, there was a chance meeting, at a dinner party, with an artist in Warsaw, Agnieszka Kurant, who happened to be a great-grandniece of Luxemburg herself. She suggested a meeting with her granduncle, a Dr. Kasimierz Luxemburg, Rosa Luxemburg's nephew, who at 97 years of age was still alive and lucid, in Vilnius, Lithuania. She seemed to think that the forensic analyst in Berlin had been interested in his DNA. A few weeks later, sitting in his apartment, he told us that he still saw her in his dreams, in Warsaw.

It is not as if there was anything occult about the process of research and creation that this work involved; but, repeated encounters with the details that began to accumulate – in the form of photographs and letters, in archives, prisons, forensic laboratories, hauntingly abandoned factory floors, and the streets of three cities – led to the formation of several patterns. The point was to let the patterns speak in the work, without being overwhelmed by the detail. To let the 'scaffolding' of the facts and their minutiae be dismantled, even after they had been so carefully constructed, so that the work could finally stand on its own foundations, even if not as a complete and comprehensive explanation, but as a series of cryptic but meaningful moves.

The Art History of Deep Space and Time

The Art History of Deep Space and Time, which takes off from where the Global Turn, began is an inner-galactic art historical colloquium slated to take place every second light year on a hitherto unfamiliar outpost of inter-stellar, but inner galactic space. It is the gathering of a matrix of deeply interwoven histories.

This is somewhat confusing because a light year is not a measure of time, but of space. This confusion between the categories of time and space is in keeping with the tone and style of art history, and history in general, because, while Paris can be casually referred to as the Capital of the Nineteenth Century (the vanity of a spatial mark on a temporal field), we can still talk about the fluctuating disciplinary distance and proximity between South Asian or African Art History from Art History. Some histories need to be prefaced by their geographies, while others can claim the seven seas.

Successive stellar art historians, and some meteoric curators, have tried, on several occasions, to devise a means of circumventing this paradox, but have failed.

This means, that at any given point in time, there are 'X' number of local art histories occurring simultaneously at intervals of approximately two light years across the breadth of the entire inner core of the galaxy of Art History. Here, 'X' is computed simply by dividing the radius of the inner galaxy in light years by two. The fact of an expanding universe means that this number is never constant. No one is quite sure as to how many iterations of the locality are currently pursuing their eccentric orbits through deep space.

In practice, the simple cosmic fact of being light years apart is generally misrepresented as the illusion of being light years ahead. Everywhere, everywhen, space is mistaken for time. This is as true now as it was on the day which had no yesterday.

Fundamental Confusions

As of now, this paradox has had an interesting, if elliptical, impact on the

work of contemporary inner-galactic artists, art historians and curators. It remains, however, to be seen as to whether or not the confusion between space and time (between here and now) that is the hall mark of the eccentric orbit of every contemporary art exhibition (and art historical exercise) will eventually be challenged by a more realistic (and conceptually sophisticated) assessment of the map of inner-galactic folds in space-time.

Until this matter is satisfactorily resolved, the fundamental problem of the periodization and chronology of contemporary inner-galactic art movements, compounded by the perceptive distortions of asynchronous simultaneity, will remain as an irritant and as a provocation to the cosmic artistic and art historian community, and will continue to be positioned endlessly as the thematic core of exhibitions and the persistent anchor of catalogue essays and conferences. Artists will continue to ask ‘How Far?’ and ‘Till When?’ and wonder ‘How Long?’ and ‘Since When?’ as a way of positioning themselves and the content of their works. Curators will continue to want to keep pace and extend the spatial co-ordinates of their reach and influence, even as they lose time. The Galactic turn, like the Arctic tern, that bird exhausted by its long seasonal migrations from one pole to another, will drop half-dead on arrival.

Satellite Events

It is now known that some objects floating in space hitherto considered to be planets are in fact not qualified to be defined as such. Pluto, an object at the outer edge of the solar system that contains the Earth is now a demoted or retired planet. Its status as an ex-planet, or an object that pretended to be a planet until its cover was blown hovers somewhere between that of an un-anchored satellite, a giant adrift asteroid and a very massive iceberg in outer space waiting for a passing space-ship to be its titanic. Ex-planets and planetary pretenders, like discursive frameworks who have seen better days and candidates for theoretical attention hungry for the lime-light, sulk at the peripheries of every solar system as angry clumps of dark matter, causing endless discord amongst art historians and the lay public alike about the inclusiveness (or otherwise) of a canon.

Dysnomia

The catalogue of a biennial in near space, an object likely to generate great interest in the art historians of tomorrow, is titled 'Dysnomia'. Dysnomia is the satellite of Ceris - a recently discovered trans-Neptune object that has become a rival of Pluto in terms of consideration for sub-planetary status. While Pluto, as we have just seen, is an ex-planet, Ceris is a planet-to-be, waiting in the wings of astronomy.

Dysnomia, the satellite of Ceris (also the daughter of Ceris, the goddess of discord in Greek Mythology) is one of the most elusive and enigmatic objects in our solar system. In Psychiatry and Psychology, Dysnomia is the name given to the clinical condition that involves the repeated forgetting of common words used to name familiar objects, phenomena or concepts. We commonly experience it as the momentarily aphasic phenomenon of being unable to utter a word despite it being at 'the tip of our tongues'.

The inability to recall and use simple words to describe what we are thinking or doing is a general condition in contemporary art, as much as it is in art history. Hence, Dysnomia is an excellent title for the discursive flagship of our stellar canon.

Dying Stars

Research in the history of inter-galactic art is a formidable challenge. Many art historians been burnt out by the experience. They are universally recognized as dead or dying stars that once held entire planetary systems in thrall through the sheer force of their gravitational power. Typically, if the discursive star gets too big, problems begin. Sheer size means that the star has to burn more energy than is produced at its core. This leads to a depletion of the inner resources of the star.

Once a particular intellectual mandate gets spent and exhausted, it collapses in on itself, becoming extremely dense even as it loses virtually all of its mass and energy. Sometimes this has been known to result in a conceptual black hole, a naked singularity whose event horizon is a threshold that no proximate object can resist falling into. The collapse of certain solar systems has been attributed to the over extended ambitions of their suns. Intellectual (and we might add, curatorial) maturity lies in growing at a moderate pace,

and in doing everything possible to avoid the fate of becoming a giant star on the verge of implosion.

The Number 42

Despite the many differences in culture, planetary composition and climate across the inner galaxy and between different art histories, there are certain persistent and common features. Even the History of Art at the End of the Universe is not as far out as its proponents have claimed. Each solar system invariably has only forty-two works of art, and the short art historical monograph for the region inevitably consists of precisely forty-two pages. The ubiquity of the number “forty two” across the guides and has been attributed to an obscure folkloric source that continues to exercise a mysterious fascination over the minds of curators and artistic directors. People have sought answers to this question in vain. ‘Forty Two’, it is commonly believed, is the key to some question of universal significance. But no one is sure as to what the question is. Artists, of course, never tire of mining the number. At one not very distant Solar Systems Biennale, an artist was able to create an installation that involved re-aligning a constellation of forty-two icy asteroids in the Kuiper Belt beyond the orbit of Neptune, as a site-specific intervention in deep space.

The rule of forty-two artworks per biennale does however come with a rider. Not every art work is visible, and it is possible that there are many more, that have not been counted, even by their curators, or by art historians, simply because they have never been seen. When considering anything in deep space it is essential to remember a fundamental maxim of inter-planetary travel - *“L’essentiel est invisible pour les yeux”* (“What is essential is invisible to the eye”). The practical application of this truth has led many artists to believe that there is something fundamentally not quite right with the universe.

This conviction need not give rise to any crippling anxiety. The universe has its reasons for being what it is.

There is no need for panic.