



Foreground Maneuvers

Raqs Media Collective

An afternoon spent at the Liverpool dockyards in 2003 taught us a lesson in trying to understand things that were beginning to be ubiquitous around us then, but were still stubbornly refusing to enter language. We had no words at hand, at that time, to describe the vacancy and silence of an automated shipyard efficiently working with a handful of people. And the desolate neighborhoods not far away.

By the mid-nineties of the twentieth century, the Liverpool shipyard workers and dockers had lost their last battle to remain relevant in the calculus of global production. Containerization, gantry cranes, and automated production lines had flattened entire working class subcultures, skill-sets, and neighborhoods. Global trade grew; more ships than ever were at sea and coming to port.

The foreground, which governed these realities, was constituted of productivity, competitive edges, and triumphalism.

We rendered this with an analysis in two acts:

The first act was to understand the seismic shifts in the dispersal and connections in the production process and technology deployment. In 2004, we described this as:

The combination of widespread cybernetic processes, increased economies of scale, agile management practices that adjust production to demand, and inventory status reports in a dispersed global assembly line has made the mere manufacture of things a truly global fact. Cars, shoes, clothes, and medicines, or any commodity for that matter, are produced by more or less the same processes, anywhere. The manufacture of components, the research and design process, the final assembly and the marketing infrastructure no longer need to be circumscribed within one factory, or even one nation state or regional economic entity.

The second act sought to comprehend the “production of residue” within the capitalist production process itself, and which expressed itself with a wearing—and tearing—down of the histories and densities of peoples and places.

The first was a dynamic vortex of metamorphosis, and the second was a slower tempo of falling apart.

Half Premonition

In 2004, we also wrote about Capital and its residue:

Capital and its Residue ... by ‘residue’, we mean those elements of the world that are engulfed by the processes of Capital, turned into “waste” or “leftovers,” left behind, even thrown away. Capital transforms older forms of labor and ways of life into those that are either useful for it at present, or those that have no function and so must be made redundant ... Sometimes, like a sportsman with an injury who no longer has a place on the team, a factory that closes down ensures that the place it was located in ceases to be a destination ... What happens to the people in the places that fall off the map?

The foreground, which governed these realities, was constituted of the buzzwords Innovate, Catch-Up, and Update.

Ascent of Productivity, Free Fall of Life-Chances

Things have changed since we were in the Liverpool dockyards. Global GDP has climbed from thirty-nine trillion USD to seventy-five trillion USD.

Compared to even what was apparent in 2004, a far greater swathe of functions (within manufacturing, services, and the financial domain) has been given over to automation in the past decade. It is predicted that from 2021 the churning will begin to manifest loudly. For instance, in the UK, more than ten million workers will be at risk over the next fifteen years. In some sectors,

this will result in a thirty percent loss in jobs. Between 2000 and 2015, thirty percent of the jobs in manufacturing in the US were lost to automation, and the forthcoming wave of automation of service industries (including driving, office work, courier services, sales, and a number of caregiving functions) will see a higher loss. By 2021, India will be witness to twenty-three percent of the global jobs lost to automation. In China, while figures at the national economy level are hard to come by, it is possible to get a sense of what is going on by looking at individual enterprises and sectors. Foxconn, which makes Apple phones and computers in southern China, reduced the number of its workers by more than fifty percent recently. Following this, 505 factories across Dongguan in the Guangdong province have invested 430 million GBP in robotics.

These figures broadly indicate the fact that a large number of workers are losing their grip on employment well before what would have been socially recognized as retirement age. Until now, this meant that workers made redundant in factories, industrialized agriculture, and mines would retrain to work as drivers, couriers, supermarket checkout personnel, salesmen, call center workers or security guards. But now that even service industries are increasingly becoming automated, large numbers of people are becoming unemployable, even in “second jobs.”

The coherence and confidence of the formed foregrounds that had been governing is perhaps not as strong.

The Bulge

All this is happening even as a “youth bulge” breaks out across the world, but especially in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America, and in “depressed pockets” of the ex-industrial North. A “youth bulge” is the appearance of a majority of fifteen to twenty-four year old men and women in global demography. A UNICEF report on the global youth bulge spells it out in bald terms.

Each year, approximately 121 million adolescents turn 16 years old—89 percent of which are located in developing regions—and can enter the world’s labour market. But most of those who want to work are unable to find jobs. Moreover, with nearly 1.1 billion new potential workers expected between 2012 and 2020, demographic forces will only exacerbate youth unemployment over time.

This means a sharp expansion of the number of young people who feel that they have no prospects layered over and above a sudden increase in the number of middle-aged people who feel unwanted after giving the best years of their lives to the economy.

Algorithms supervise algorithms in an unending chain that leaves room for humans only at the summit of a pyramid of processes, or at the bottom end of some economies of human-based care work—sex, care of infants, of the ill, and of the aged. Here, too, there are tendencies of an eventual displacement by affective robots.

Place disappears, yet lingers like a ghost. Neither invisible, nor operational. The dockyards, and their neighborhoods, haunt capitalism.

A Welter

Everywhere, Capital faces the accumulation of its own residue, as it races to other planets.

Our speculation in 2004 about residue read:

Where do they go? They are forced, of course, to go in search of the map that has abandoned them. But when they leave everything behind and venture into a new life they do not do so entirely alone. They go with the networked histories of other voyages and transgressions, and are able at any point to deploy the insistent, ubiquitous insider knowledge of today's networked world.

We had not understood or even guessed the acceleration by which in a mere ten years, the realities of Residue would become so Foregrounded, and play themselves out with such high stakes. This has emerged from within the metropolitan centers of capital's grandeur. It has reached the highest offices. Ranting on it has become a cherished pastime of demagogues.

This is the new foreground. It has positioned itself alongside the other, recent, foregrounds.

But this is not a politics of transgression.

It offers a promise of a future that has lost the taste for the future.

It is a pathos that is closing on itself through fear.

It is self-hate that is full of distaste towards becoming.

It expresses a poetics of disappearance.

It is a phantom that emanates from deep within the detritus of capitalism.

To succeed, it has to destroy itself and the life around it.

But there are also collisions.

They bring vibrations of rising intensity in their wake. Sometimes they are distant, sometimes they are close at hand but subterranean. At other times, they seem to come from just around the corner. And they are rising in intensity.

Another (and another) Foreground is gathering force and vibration, and there are other possible voyages.

We can sense them, but as in 2004, we do not as yet have words with which to think or talk about them.

Voyages that will swerve away from ecological death wishes.

Voyages that will slant away from the banality of work as the only purpose of life.

Voyages that will spin away from engorged belonging(s).

Raqs Media Collective

Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta) follows its self-declared imperative of "kinetic contemplation" to produce a trajectory that is restless in its forms and methods, yet concise with the infra-procedures that it invents. The collective makes

contemporary art, edits books, curates exhibitions, and stages situations and lecture-performances. It has collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers, curators, and theater directors, and has made films. It co-founded Sarai, the inter-disciplinary and incubatory space at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, in 2001, where it initiated processes that have left a deep impact on contemporary culture in India.

Exhibitions curated by Raqs include *The Rest of Now* (Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008), *Sarai Reader 09* (Gurugram, 2012-13), *INSERT2014* (New Delhi, 2014), and *Why Not Ask Again* (Shanghai Biennale, 2016-2017). Publications include the nine *Sarai Readers* (Sarai, 2001-2012), *Seepage* (Sternberg Press, 2010), and *Written by, Read by* (Art and Theory Publishing, 2017). Their work has been exhibited at Documenta and at the Venice, São Paulo, Manifesta, Istanbul, Shanghai, Sydney, and Taipei Biennials. Their prospective, *With an Untimely Calendar*, was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, in 2014-2015. Other solo shows at museums include ones at the Isabella Gardner Museum (Boston, 2012), CA2M (Madrid, 2014), MUAC (Mexico City, 2015), Tate Exchange (London, 2016), Fundación Proa (Buenos Aires, 2015), and the Whitworth Gallery (Manchester, 2017).

www.raqsmediacollective.net

Art Work + Essay

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