

Maya Kóvskaya

## Propositioning the World: Raqs Media Collective and the Shanghai Biennale



*Raqs Media Collective will be curating the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, the first version of this major international biennial to be produced entirely in the Eastern hemisphere. During the collective’s critical early stages of formulating curatorial concepts, I spoke with them about their plans for the show and how it will fit into the history of curatorial practice.*

Raqs Media Collective, left to right: Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, 2014. Photo: Srinivas Kuruganti.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** In 2013, you said: “We are not impresarios, we are not directors, we are not managers. Perhaps the most interesting form our curatorial model of authorship takes is as something of a hybrid between catalyst, witness, agent, and interlocutor.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than curating thematic shows in which artworks illustrate an idea laid out by the curator, you have chosen to focus on networks, interconnections, nexuses, interstices, and residues produced through temporary exchanges occasioned by the exhibition. Could you elaborate on the ways this diverse array of concurrent, shifting modalities of curation might be mobilized in the context of the Shanghai Biennale?

**Raqs Media Collective:** We are interested in what we would like to call the “propositional”—as a procedure, as a protocol, as a prognostic. The proposition always has a dual character; it is an utterance as well as an invitation for a response. It enters the present primarily to inflect the futures dispersed within it. It calls out, it invites; we could say it offers a promise, even that it holds out the frank possibility of seduction. The proposition is never closed in on itself. To be itself, it has to invoke, invite, or invent a response. It involves a risk, because propositions need not be honoured. They can be refused. But whatever they do, they produce a transformation in the person who responds, regardless of whether the response is an acceptance or a refusal. We are interested in how arguments, counter-arguments, and stories, instead of being tangential or adversarial to each other, can be made to act propositionally. How does one make propositions to the world, and how does the world change in response to what has been said, and imagined, propositionally? This is the important question.

The invitation to the artist, as we see it, is only a starting point. It will cascade further. Artists might build their own invitations on the basis of the one that we send them. They might take the form of speculations, refusals, and prevarications, even, by way of response. Let’s assume that we encounter an artist with an argument: they respond to us with a counter-argument, and we get back to them with a story, which in turn takes both the artist and us to another plane in the argument. We think that this is how we will end up working in Shanghai, by stitching together a range of arguments, vivid counter-arguments, and tangential fables, or, if you like, maneuvers, disputations, and stories. We enjoy the act of slow stitching, of tying together seemingly disparate objects, fine threads, ungovernable affects, laughter, misspelt quotations, blinding insight, and glowing, luminous darkness.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** Can you give some specific examples of how your curatorial ethos has manifested itself in some of your most noteworthy curatorial projects, such as *Rest of Now*, Manifesta 7, Bolzano, Italy, 2008; *Seven Steps Away From Oblivion*, the show within the show you curated for *Indian Highway* at Serpentine Gallery, 2008, and toured elsewhere; *Sarai Reader 09* at the Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, India, 2012–13; and *INSERT2014*, New Delhi?

*Scenarios at Manifesta 7, 2008, Trentino, Italy. Courtesy of Manifesta Foundation.*

**Raqs Media Collective:** In *Rest of Now*, an exhibition presented in an ex-aluminium factory in Bolzano, over the period of eighteen months we gravitated toward a way of seeing how the “remainder” or “residue” of a delirious history of war driven and post-war economic boom production could be harnessed as a source for life rather than as a mere relic of what had passed. The exhibition we actually





“co-curated” (with Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg, and Adam Budak) was titled *Scenarios* and held at another venue (the Franzenfeste Fortress) near the Italian-Austrian border. *Scenarios* was an exhibition of the building as much as about the building—and so we arrived at a modality that was based on listening and light; we largely left the venue untouched but profoundly transformed its scenario through voice, light, and shadow.

Top and bottom: *Scenarios* at Manifesta 7, 2008, Trentino, Italy. Courtesy of Manifesta Foundation.

With *Seven Steps Away from Oblivion*, we wanted to look at how landscape can be constituted, and not only geographically. We invited seven documentary filmmakers to respond to our sense of key moments in their work. Some of them reshot sequences, some re-edited, others intervened

*Steps Away From Oblivion*, 2008, installation view at *Indian Highway*, Serpentine Gallery, London. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.



into their material in other ways. It was also a way of revisiting the memory encoding function of the moving image to make it act against the amnesiac tendencies of our time.

*Sarai Reader 09*, 2012–13, installation view over an eight-month period, Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon. Photo: Shveta Sarda. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.



*Sarai Reader 09*, which lasted nine full months at the Devi Art Foundation, was a different kind of undertaking. Its premise was promise and possibility, and hence we started with a show that opened up a sense of ripe futurity that was empty and full at the same time. This was a wager on our part to see what time does to a curatorial proposition. So you could say this was a curatorial proposition that had to do with the pleasures and perils of risks, of projecting desires into uncertainty.

Finally, *INSERT2014* was more a matter of finding ways to fold the world into our city and to fold the city into our world. We wanted to make a claim to global centrality, in terms of the ambition and intensity of thinking that we have long known Delhi to be home to. And so, that is what it was—an engine for thinking the world today, from Delhi.

In each of these circumstances, there are shifts of emphasis, new details and desires, but there is also an underlying commitment to curation as an open-ended, generative process.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** You have noted that “In astronomy, the data sets . . . are so dense that they need collaborative linkages between various capabilities and locations for us to make sense of them.”<sup>2</sup> If the world/s we inhabit are of a similar character, how can art speak to this density and complexity, and



what kinds of curatorial strategies can build such collaborative linkages, co-inhabitable locations, and cascading “new world conversations” within and through art?

**Raqs Media Collective:** Artists can become as patient and ambitious as astronomers. They can be committed to going the necessary distance and to the exploration of darkness. We think that this mode of practice may yet equip art with a new set of multiverses. What is most interesting in a practice like astronomy is its comfort with the unknown. Astronomers are very happy to admit to not knowing much about most of the sky that they look at. They know a lot, but they know that they don’t know even more. This means that every corner of their vision is an opportunity to make minds move together. Artists and curators can sometimes share this excitement about the unknown. We are with these space cadets, in training, perpetually, for the unknown.

This is not just about being “exploratory”; it is about thinking the unthinkable. It is about assuming responsibility for turning art into a space where difficult and challenging concepts and images can be held up for scrutiny, with care, thought, and consideration. We see contemporary art as a kind of philosophical laboratory and artists as adventurer foragers in the forests of our contemporary consciousness.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** Above you talk of the role of adventurer and the explorer. The cosmonaut and deep-sea diver both appear in your works as manifestations of this role, in part, as well. Likewise, from early on, ideas of movement across time and space, particularly metaphors of travel, have appeared in your curatorial practices. For example, you posited one type of

Yogesh Barve, *Existing Camouflage*, 2014, installation view at Insert2014, Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts, New Delhi. Photo: Umang Bhattacharyya. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.

Raqs Media Collective, *Log Book Entry Before the Storm*, 2014, installation view at Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2014. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.



Raqs Media Collective, *Log Book Entry Before the Storm*, 2014, installation view at Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2014. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.



curatorial fulfillment as “mak[ing] an artwork travel the length and breadth of its own possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> You described the collaboration that produced *Building Sight*, 2006, as “an open ended conversation between fellow travellers.”<sup>4</sup> The “new ideas and concepts, discursive as well as aesthetic,” in the platforms of *Sarai Reader 09* book and exhibition, are referred to as “travelling companions” who “find their separate yet occasionally converging itineraries”<sup>5</sup> in the course of their collaborations. In the booklet handed

out at *Asamayavali/Untimely Calendar*—your retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, 2014–15—you addressed the visitors as “passing travellers,” and visitors to the *INSERT2014* exhibition were encouraged to become wanderers and find spaces to take rest inside the labyrinth of the space housing the exhibition.<sup>6</sup>



An early figure of the traveller emerged in your public practice when you co-founded the Sarai program in 2000 at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in New Delhi, invoking the *caravansarai*—a cultural

Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (T-shirt, No T-shirt)*, 2011/14, installation view at *Insert2014*, Indra Gandhi National Centre of the Arts, New Delhi. Photo: Umang Bhattacharyya. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.

phenomenon shared across much of the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, the Persian Empire, and the Silk Road. The caravan was a group of long-distance travellers, pilgrims and traders, explorers and adventurers, on missions both sacred and profane, and *sarai* were their sites of shelter—rest stops for wayfarers to sojourn along the road. Through the exchange of stories, beliefs, ideas, capital, and material culture that took place there, these *caravansarai* became generative nexus points of hybridity, syncretism, and cultural diffusion. In other words, they were places that afforded myriad minds from a vast spectrum of professions and places the rare opportunity to meet and “move together.”

In many ways, your programming at Sarai brought people, ideas, cultural production, and art practices from across the world into this space of concentrated collaborative and multidisciplinary exchange. Sarai performed a similar cultural and ideational function through art, cyber-media practices, urban engagements, publishing, residencies, workshops, research programs, and more. Would it be fair to say that, already, in 2000, with the founding of Sarai, the ethos and modes of your curatorial work had already begun to take shape?

**Raqs Media Collective:** Everything seems to fit into patterns when viewed with hindsight, doesn't it? But hindsight is a cruel companion; she allows little by way of surprise, even retrospective surprise. When we were founding Sarai in 2000, curation was not uppermost in our minds. What we knew was that we needed to create a generative space, a context for making and thinking, and a means to gather together different energies and practices. During the first five years of Sarai we were enveloped by the production of various kinds of works and utterances by over a few thousand people. The *Sarai Readers* (a book series that spanned nine volumes) became a critical platform for writing and thinking. Around the end of 2005 we became aware that a form of thinking called “the curatorial” was happening in Sarai, and we started building on it, with awareness and experimentation. Over time, we have come to recognize that when we curate, we try to create contexts for the generation of ideas, lay the ground

*Sarai Reader 09, 2012–13, installation view over an eight-month period, Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon. Photo: Shveta Sarda. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.*



each time for an architecture that can attract a range of practice and multiple disciplines, and create new publics; invoking them out of hunches, desires, and the intersections of patience and prognosis.

Further, around the end of the 1990s, we had already begun to sense that a new generation was emerging that would move between locations, production sites, disciplines, and institutional contexts, with a fragile stability over time. This was happening around us in many domains. Sarai, we think, was an attempt to provide a meeting and sparring ground for this movement. One could argue that “the curatorial” is a mode of thinking that has to deal with a robust undisciplined gathering within fragile time arcs.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** Are there ways the format of the large-scale biennial-type exhibition is particularly suited to offering opportunities to engender such a “robust” yet “undisciplined gathering”? As I read you, “undisciplined” can be understood in contrast to the kind of repressive discipline Michel Foucault wrote about, or as a kind of unruly freedom. How might a biennial-scale curatorial project afford conditions to create a context for embodying what you have called the “refusal to sustain the rupture between theory and practice, between thinking and doing and creating and reflecting?”<sup>7</sup> What has this refusal looked like in previous curatorial projects



of yours, and how might this injunction play out in the context of the 2016 Shanghai Biennale?

**Raqs Media Collective:** During our Manifesta, Pirate Bay recycled a junked bus and traveled with it from Stockholm to Bolzano. It reached Bolzano with over thirty participants. They had planned for eight. People had joined in from everywhere en route. The bus was a place where ideas, codes, music, recipes, etc., were created, discussed, and multiplied. It exploded into a great party. This example provides one way of maintaining that refusal to sustain the rupture between theory and practice that you refer to—a form of lived practice. There could be other ways that could involve the unfolding of unconventional and combative artistic research, along with some necessary blurring of disciplinary boundaries. The question of “who is supposed, or required, to do what” could get entangled with the question of “who can be imagined to be doing what,” or, refusals to abide by the protocols that determine what gets put into the separate boxes of theory or practice could quietly slip under the radar of recognition and mix things up. Ancient and early medieval North Indian empires developed codes of what was permissible by drawing up elaborate prohibitions and proscriptions on artists. The rulers themselves were cautioned not to trust artists, as artists were seen a tricksters and impostors. Our guess is that these protocols of caution about and distrust of the artist emerged because artists (or persons we can retrospectively invoke today as artists) refused to play along with the kind of formulaic partition between doing and thinking, between logos and pathos, that were seen as necessary elements of the architecture of social order. We think that the enterprise of breaching the partitions can be potent and full of joy.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** I can see how this breaching of partitions can foster incredible creative fecundity. This can only grow exponentially when the works are able to form a living, in situ conversation, or constellation of responsive propositions. Is this what you mean when you say that artworks can be curated so that they “relate [to one another], not as frozen entities but as dynamic processes?” I’ve seen you accomplish this in quite distinct ways in two very different exhibitions that you’ve curated, *Sarai Reader 09* and *INSERT2014*. How can a curator promote this kind of dynamic and transformative interaction among the works, and what are some of the challenges you face in creating the conditions for this dynamic to emerge in the 2016 Shanghai Biennale? How do you plan to overcome those challenges?

**Raqs Media Collective:** During *Sarai Reader 09* there was an artist who loved to sleep all day under various artworks. His rationale was that in this way he was able to expand his dream space. He said that sleeping in the same bed everyday was unsatisfying for him. By finding repose under different works of art he was able to insert his personal world pictures, his dream states, into the space of the exhibition. Learning from this, our effort will be to transform exhibition-making into a quest for the making of a space of repose that can hold the energy of lucid wakefulness as well as the ricochet of dream images.

Pirate Bay, recycled bus for *The Rest of Now*, Manifesta 7, 2008, Bolzano, Italy. Courtesy of Manifesta Foundation.



**Maya Kóvskaya:** Transforming the Shanghai Biennale into a “space of repose” offers an invitation for us to see ourselves as fellow travellers joining you and the artists you’ve gathered together for a sojourn in your curatorial *caravansarai*. You have often challenged traditional notions of authorship and authority in productive ways that set in motion collaborations and multiple journeys that intersect in some places even as they diverge in others. If you regard yourselves, together with the artists you are curating, as fellow travellers, and the visitors to the exhibitions are invited to come to your curatorial *sarai* as passing travellers as well, how does this change the usual hierarchical configuration of authority relations among the curator, artist, and viewer of the artwork? What is at stake in this reconfiguration? What possibilities emerge from disrupting the familiar hierarchical authority relations in which the curator and/or the artist stand in an “authoritative position” in relation to the audience and the artwork? How does this change the experience of the art and challenge what it means to “know” something about art or force us to reconsider who is “qualified” to be an authoritative purveyor of that “knowledge?”

**Raqs Media Collective:** We recently came across an interesting design for a book cover. It featured a full, dark page interrupted by a small white dot. The book in question was about toxins, and the small white dot was meant to be a graphic representation of the quantum of knowledge that we as humans have gathered till now about toxins. Everything other than the space covered by the small white dot represented all the knowledge that still had to be searched for. To be “authoritative” in today’s world is to be imprisoned by misplaced priorities. We have to think about what other options open up when we stop trying to be authoritative all the time. These openings are what we are looking for within and through our curatorial thinking and actions.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** You are well known for your theoretical savvy. Your work contains a strong linguistic component, you are widely published, and some have even called you philosophers. So what is it, in spite of all this (or perhaps because of it) that keeps art rather than some other form of creative discourse production at the epicentre of your practice?



Foreground: Mai-Thu Perret, *Balthazar*, 2012; background: Mai-Thu Perret, *In the Universe of the Crystal Frontier*, 2014, installation view at *Insert2014*, Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts, New Delhi. Photo: Umang Bhattacharyya. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi.

**Raqs Media Collective:** Our reason for staying with art, whether as artists or as curators, is to use the visual to go beyond the retinal, to deploy language in order to approach the ineffable, to create even what might be called a set of polyphonic silences along with rich sources of active noise. We think this is important. Our purpose is to let a greater degree of uncertainty have active play in the world. If that happens, people will be compelled to reconsider themselves in the presence of art. That is what we would like to have happen.

**Maya Kóvskaya:** Thank you for offering some context for anticipating what is to come this November. Between these “polyphonic silences” and “active noises,” whatever emerges in Shanghai 2016 at your Biennale, I expect that the body of works you bring together will sing across time and space in different registers and different tones will produce a glorious polyphony of possibilities that engaging with ourselves and each other through art makes available to us. Or, as you’ve so compellingly put it in the past: “. . . [W]e could learn to speak in tongues, in other voices: in the whisper of sedition and heresy, in the songs sung in pleasure in spite of injury, in forensic diction and visionary stammer, in measured timbres and ecstatic tones, in echolalia and laughter. Even in silence, and always in poetry.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

1. Chloé Nicolet-dit-Félix and Gulru Vardar, “Interview with Raqs Media Collective on the exhibition *Sarai Reader 09*,” in “On Artistic and Curatorial Authorship,” *On Curating.org* no. 19 (June 2013), 39–42.
2. “Raqs Media Collective Interview with Chaitanya Sambrani,” *Art iT 7*, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2009), 58.
3. Nicolet-dit-Félix and Gulru Vardar, 41.
4. “Raqs Media Collective Interview with Chaitanya Sambrani.”
5. Editorial Collective, “Projections,” *Sarai Reader 09: Projections* (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2013), xi.
6. Raqs Media Collective, *INSERT2014* (New Delhi: Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation, 2014), 4.
7. Nicolet-dit-Félix and Gulru Vardar, 41.
8. *Insert2014*, 3.