

Recensions, without originals

Raqs Media Collective

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A recent work of ours, *31 Days*, outlines world and home that are getting un-shaped and in need of repair, alteration, and re-apprehension. Another recent work was the Yokohama Triennale 2020: *Afterglow*, and it asks how to care with and for the toxic. It posits a visit into our collective reservoir of intellectual and cultural resources in order to renew and gather, with auto-didacticism and luminous care.

An account of a collective self is imprinted within the pressures of the moments in which it is written. Today, as we revisit the various formations, gestures, and decisions of the three decades that we have been working together, we are within a ruined economy and a shattered social consensus. News has just arrived that India's GDP has been sliding, and is now at -24%. Rarely does a generation see this kind of constriction without a civil or territorial war. 99% of TV coverage unrelentingly plays a show trial of a young actress, whose live-in partner, a film star, died by suicide. The spread of the pandemic is reaching levels here that makes the world nervous. People are restive in unknown ways, and glimpses of this leak through social media inflections and infractions. Recently, our small dream of a backup studio-apartment for friends passing through Delhi vanished into thin air. The builder company has filed for bankruptcy, and it is now apparent that it was made of multiple shell companies. The claimants are in thousands. It makes but a small news story, and adds to the evidence of a collapsing world. What has been inaugurated, probably, is an intense phase of *scavenging capitalism*.

Within this context, we can do a rear-view mirror look at various decisions, critiques, commentaries, and creations that we were, and are, part of. We approach this with both a sense of excitement and bewilderment. We ask ourselves how to understand the difference between being on a slow time machine and being on a fast time machine, and how to tell stories that we have not heard before.

In an interview with a national newspaper a few weeks ago, we were asked how the 80s - the decade in which we were stepping out into the world - were for us. Everyone agrees that there were shifts within what we once called the 'void years' of the 80s, shifts that unfolded in multiple directions and dimensions. Now it feels like the 80s were a *shunting yard* where many rusted wagons and old engines were being discarded and newer ones sanctioned. It was an acrimonious, anxious field. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, we saw a film by a banned documentarist from erstwhile East Germany. The film was entirely an observation of railway wagons coming in and going out, joining and un-joining, in a shunting yard. It was without words, and with a foreboding of a flickering time. This was the period where we moved between demonstrations, reading groups, theatre rehearsals, film screenings in VHS, art talks, and shared photocopied essays and books. These arenas and intermittent gatherings shaped the way we experienced the unmaking and making of the world.

Looking back, one decision seems significant. Our classmates from our film school were moving into the emergent, buoyant television industry and going, via that route, into the Bombay film industry. We decided against it. The arena of documentary filmmaking was

small and fragile, but vibrant. The nature of the micro-conversations, assemblies around film viewing, and attendant workshops were energetic and questioning. They welcomed critical writing and debates between generations of established and aspiring filmmakers, where there was no separation between the amateur and the specialist, or local and the outsider. It was in this milieu that we lived the value of intellectual pursuits and affective communities, and we felt the force of gathering, and an acceptance of dissensus. To write commentaries, to make films, to assemble, to argue proposals, to create arenas of trans-cultural way of thinking, conversing and making is a continuum and needs to be thought together – this we intuitively grasped in those days.

The 90s were a decade of re-fitting of economies everywhere to unprecedented scales, new networks and accelerated mobilities leading to institutional mechanisms cranking and croaking, and also exposing various hatreds. Specifically, in our immediate surroundings, upper caste anxieties and contempt for the life of others, its morbid fear of losing control over resources and infrastructure, and its ability to whip up frenzy of religious belonging was on overt display. On the other hand, thriving practices around technological innovations brought in a density to our media experience. It is within these circumstances that we took two further decisions: One, to delve more into the socio-technological world of practices, from high art to street to neighbourhoods and, two, to create gatherings, and infrastructures of knowledge. This was our intellectual premise in the making of Sarai, a space which created the possibility of sustained investigation and exchange between many.

We are the generation that had to start the process of living with the World Wide Web. It inaugurated our understanding that infrastructure is decisive, that it needs to be shared, that it grows with an extensive public life, and that it has to be questioned and continuously innovated on. Sarai was that place where we activated and created a milieu, backed by a public architecture of sharing, in which diverse languages, dialects, disciplines, practices, forms of speech, and argumentation could contend, and nest. It was a practice in thinking as to how nodes are constituted and how they entangle other nodes as they move in epiphytic, parasitic and morphing ways. This generative and threshold-challenging movement of words, images, sounds, codes, and platforms sustained restive, defiant, patient and gregarious modes of being.

It was in those days, when the joke about us was that we were Sarai by day and Raqs after twilight, that we got invited to present our work within contemporary art. This was a tremendous boon, as it allowed us to test unconventional modes of documentary image arraying and sculpting arguments in order to delve into the spectral world of shadows and premonitions, and to speculate on the not-yet. Within a few years, a re-scrambling of sedimented historical documents and narratives with fictive and un-disciplined cartographic moves, and playing with devices like clocks, and chess boards emerged, and unpredictable itineraries surged.

We made friends, comrades, fellow travellers and allies in different cities - Beirut, New York, Amsterdam, Mexico City, Mumbai, Barcelona, Ramallah, Athens, Bangalore, Dubai, Johannesburg, London, Hong Kong, Berlin, Shanghai, Kolkata - and it is these alliances that also keep our practice grounded in the world. We brought all into conversation via the Sarai Readers and Sarai events and, increasingly, through curatorial manoeuvres and measures. Our curatorial ethics developed here: as sites of gathering and as infrastructural gambits that

are sharpened through their ability to call in many experiences, intelligences, and subjectivities.

From 2000 onwards, there seems to be a turn in the world towards unbridled and galloping masculinity, and the muscularity of highly productive economies, with their elites riding them. It heralds a new iteration of *rentier capitalism* building its insecurities onto security and surveillance regimes. This inaugurates social media, a medium in the making and being tested from late 90s onwards. In Sarai, with our coder colleagues, we had imagined and proposed what was then called social software. That is, software where you could work with, meet others, and leave a trace of this encounter. OPUS was one among these, and which got global recognition. But soon the turn towards consolidation of social media platforms swamped the million mutinies of code. The ideas that code should be free, and free for all to modify, is what we thought the world was going to be, and we still work with it as an ethos. We argued that a culture thrives where all are creators of *rescensions*, with no anxiety of originality. We remain curious and cautious about the delirium and disruption afforded by the immediacy of social media. In Sarai, with some of our colleagues, we had predicted that media will alter the terms of social life. Over the last ten years, popular tumult and rebellions have crested with the ease afforded by the tools that social media has brought into our mutual relationships. It has changed the governed, and changed governmentality.

Today, in an ancient urban village in the southern part of our city, there is a studio with a blue floor, and this is where we work. This is where our working table, the stage of our arguments, and our unwieldy anarchic, sits, waiting. For the past many months this studio has appeared intermittently in our dreams because we haven't been there in person; so it comes to us instead. The lockdown has kept the studio locked in on itself, and we have met, every other day, online: to share ideas, to argue, to plan, to schedule, and reschedule, everything, including the writing of this text.

Many friends had commented about the awkward word 'Media' in the middle of an otherwise poetic evocation of complex cultural and praxological genealogies in our name. We neither took a position for, nor against, particular forms, and we let the meaning of the 'media' in our middle name slide between medium, techné, and mode of being. Nowadays that 'middle' is often the only discussion in philosophy and arts. That awkward middle has foregrounded itself in a most virulent, poetic, lifesaving, and also pathological way. What does this mean? One of the abiding logics of our practice is the tuning, modulation of, and play with foregrounds. We try to shift focus and change lenses to arrive at different ways of locating a foreground. Hibernating, sedimented, forgotten, misplaced, aborted, or over-charged worlds are re-positioned and weighed again. A closed mine, a lost rhinoceros, an old fingerprint, an ancient shipwreck, a broken cup, a hard biscuit, a century-old herbarium, a Cold War bunker, a grainy footage of a shipyard, a handmade dog in an archive, a fable from a workers' newspaper, a collectively re-written diary, all appear, and sometimes, like a Mughal miniature landscape, merge into each other without fear of perspectival order. Or, shorn of accoutrement of historical bondage, they come close to possess us and overcome the limits posed by linear time.

This happens to our name as well. This coming decade, all the three words will be under varying argumentative pressures. The Islamicate mystic overtones of the word "Raqs" contaminates many an ear even as it reassures many others; the inflammable word "Media"

now haunts as infection and as redemption; and “Collective” may be the last bastion of our ability to act with a degree of trust and deliberation. When work happens and conversation grows, it will harness a kind of bioluminescence from a triangulated consciousness of these three vectors.