

Ten Nonillion Particles and Five Million Incidents: Thinking in COVID 19 Time

Raqs Media Collective

It is estimated that there are 10^{31} (Ten Nonillion) virus particles in the air at any given time. This makes viruses the most abundant biological material, as well as the most prevalent 'bad news' on the earth. In numbers, or in 'newsworthiness', we are nothing compared to them.

Although viruses are not strictly 'life' as we understand life, they do contain some of the instructions that make life 'alive'. Like us, and with us, they move, they replicate (by instructing the cells they invade to help them replicate), their populations accumulate and decline. They are, like us, tangled bundles of RNA inside sheaths of protein, hungry, horny, looking for room.

But unlike us, and every other creature, these 'unliving' entities are also very, very small. Small enough to enter the cells of human, plant and animal hosts, even bacteria, and take them over from the inside at an astonishingly rapid rate. Small enough to cause the fall of the largest, strongest life forms.

The Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019, or COVID 19, the microscopic vectoral specter that haunts human society at a planetary level now, is caused by a virus that has been named as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). Perhaps SARS-CoV-2 evolved in those small but hardy mammals that defy gravity - bats. Perhaps it jumped to a rare Pangolin. Perhaps a wet market in Wuhan caused it to identify and stalk a human being as its next host. The rest is not even current affairs any longer, it is already history.

This virus, hitch-hiker across species, averages at a diameter of around 125 nanometers. The diameter of an average human cell is a hundred microns ($100 \mu\text{m}$). That makes the virus less than a hundred billionth smaller than the average human cell. A modest fraction of the ten nonillion viral particles, floating in the aerosol streams left in the wake of jets of air released by sneezes, coughs and exhalations by human beings, are the viruses that cause the COVID 19 disease. We have never had ourselves sized up before by something so small. And as of now, it is mightier than all our military and medical might.

The presence of this virus has altered our sense of the circumference of life, and the sense of what we call Earth, by blurring the distinction between visceral, vivid life and enigmatic, scrambled information. It has inaugurated a shift in our awareness of our own ontology. This shift is beginning to be recognized by billions of people. After centuries of thinking of ourselves as 'subjects' in the universe, as masters of an object called nature, we have to reconsider our place on the planet and to rejoice in our understanding of the fact that the earth is a lively place, with many agents acting on each other and us, even at a cellular level. This doesn't just require a cognitive shift, it also calls upon us to press 'restart' on our dispositional awareness of what is inside, around, and between us as a species. A virus has dismantled the world in a way that no human ideas could have done

in such a short period of time. We could accept this as a challenge and a provocation to understand the potential of this moment.

The reason we preface our remarks with this consideration on numbers, size and dispositions is because we think it gives us all an opportunity to reflect on the hubris of our species: a tendency towards an overestimation of our strength and our significance, on a planetary scale. Perhaps this is an addiction. Perhaps it is an obsession. Perhaps it is a code, plan, or blueprint that has run amok on itself. In the long run, and now in the very short run, we may be too insignificant, too weak, and too many, for the planet to be sentimentally attached to. Even this most alive of planets is actually a remarkably unsentimental entity. We don't really matter much.

In Delhi, where the three of us in the Raqs Media Collective live and work, we are currently, like our co-citizens, subject to the largest and most extensive lockdown in human history. The Indian state, after weeks of relative inattentiveness to the impending threat of the COVID-19 virus, announced a severe lockdown, suspending transportation, banning and criminalizing movement, and enforcing a severe 'work from home' policy.

The three of us in Raqs have aging, ill and injured parents, and one of us has a teenage daughter. One of our colleagues in the Raqs studio has an infant daughter. Obtaining food, stocking up on supplies and ensuring medical care for the vulnerable people in our homes is no longer something we can take for granted. Each day brings with it a new adventure. A curfew pass becomes a way to ferry spirits and keep spirits high. Hasty, quiet questions are asked, and answered, about the rations in kitchen closets. One of us has to drive through a still, eerily quiet city each day, escorting a day nurse who cares for an injured parent, negotiating checkpoints where armed police and paramilitaries ask the same relentless questions. "Why are you out on the streets?" "Why are you, Out?"

One evening, on one of these strangely tranquil but tense drives, thousands of people were seen walking, with vacant, empty gazes walking towards a great nowhere. It was raining. Otherwise, the tears on the faces of some of these walking men, women and children would have been visible. It took some time to realize that many of the walkers were weeping. They were migrant workers, leaving cities like Delhi and Mumbai in a mass exodus, because landlords had served eviction notices, because there was no work, and often, because there was no food. The swelling crowd that was leaving the cities, congregating at the cities gates, led some to compare this episode with memories of the displacement of millions during the partition of India in 1947. No one quite knew what to make of what was going on.

Elsewhere, the vicious spiral of half-digested facts and fully-formed rumours led to the spin of twisted sectarian hatred, with already vulnerable minority populations being targeted by innuendo by the state and by the media. Instances of solidarity floated like islands in a troubled sea of rage. We witness the daily event-management of a clueless state form, we see nation-states and bureaucracies unwilling and unable to deal with the turbulence in the wake of a microbe. We see the daily unfurling of the flags of apocalypse and the quiet sobriety of reckoning how to make it through one more day. We hear litanies of numbers. We pause, we tell stories, we laugh, we cry in secret, we trade music

and entire libraries of pdfs for a future lifetime of reading. Ordinary conversations with grocers, cleaners, doctors and nurses suddenly acquire a philosophical intensity. Death enters jokes and life is haunted by the absence of being able to actually touch someone. We wear masks and try not to become them. Our studio is silent, for the time being.

Five Million Incidents - the year-long concept for the 'occupation of time'- that we set in motion, together with curatorial mentors and the programme department of the Goethe Institutes of Delhi and Kolkata is in suspended animation. Waiting, hibernating, watching out for curtains to be called on the protocols of 'social distancing', and to revive itself in a few months time. It is already glimmering in memory: we remember the magic of conversations, of fungal infestations, of music and mirrors, of nakedness and fulsome embraces, of words, laughter and difficult thoughts, of new solidarities that a fresh generation of artists have discovered in Delhi and Kolkata. After a busy season and a half, we have deferred what should have happened in spring to what we hope can happen in the monsoon, washed and made new again by the rain, once the virus subsides.

If the virus can teach us anything it is that the vanity of borders, of confident assertions of identity, of the games of 'us' and 'them' that are played so often in cultural arenas are actually meaningless. We hope that those of us who inhabit the arts and culture will learn to respect the multitudes of life forms that teem in our bodies. We hope it will bring with it a new awareness of the complexity of life, and of the savage simplicity of death and disease. We hope it will bring a greater philosophical depth to our everyday concerns and activities. We hope to regain the freedom to be whimsical (because what else can one be in the face of great adversity) and jettison the license to be frivolous. We hope that it will teach us to live with what we consign and condemn as toxic, and to respect limits to growth, to speed, to strength - limits that we have often tended to forget or ignore.

We wait. The pandemic will recede, soon, we hope. We will amortize our debt to the present by returning, again and again to even the near future that seems so distant now. The world, and our interconnected consciousness, ravaged by quarantine, will emerge, inheriting a new sense of danger and possibility. Perhaps this time will teach us to turn time into our comrade, not our adversary. Perhaps we will find new languages to think and act in. Perhaps we will be short of breath. We hope we will not be short of time.