

Freeing the Weight of the Habitual

Raqs Media Collective

In a recent conversation, the Vietnamese-American writer Ocean Vuong elucidated the thinking process behind his new book, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*:

“It was important to me, at least in this book, that violence remain independent from any character’s self-worth, rendering it inert, terrible, and felt—but not a means of “development.” Through *Kishōtenketsu*, violence becomes fact and not a vehicle towards a climax. Having been a student mainly of Western literature, it became clear to me that the most perennial protagonist is not necessarily the main character, but conflict-driven plot. In Western narratology, the plot is the dominant mode to which all characters are subordinate. But I wanted a novel to hold these characters thoroughly and, most importantly, on their own terms, free from a system of governance, even one of my own making. I could not employ the plot-heavy strategy because I needed these people to exist as they are, full of stories but not for a story.”
(1)

We all engage with questions related to the forms and premises of the “system of governance” that introduces into a work multiple subjectivities and stories, which then proceed to interlace and collide. In exhibition-making, through the curatorial act, such questions run through an exhibition — either explicitly or implicitly — from the first announcement to the last review.

As a writer, Vuong expresses sentiments that seem to be at the core of the discomfort shared by practitioners of the curatorial mode:

Are we implicitly trapped within an already assumed intellectual and cultural narratology?

And: Are we continuously crafting ways of doing things that keep certain tendencies at bay and working out modalities that can bring in different kinds of co-habitation?

And: What is the mechanism — and how do we seek it — of “freeing” the weights of habitual narrative entrapments?

Every exhibitionary frame works within a milieu. But it also *creates* a milieu, in which it streams the diverse currents that it encounters, and from which it amplifies. This is how exhibitions partake in the making of populous milieux through their practices. Formed of stratified sediments, hibernating worlds and immediate urgencies, all complexities also contain multiple milieux. This marks the relevance and critical force of this mode of thinking.

What are these milieux constituted of? Each can be thought of as a thicket of affective and conceptual densities and deletions, of prerogatives and lesions, and of known unknowns and unreachable edges. These milieux are contingent formations, but they are also historically perforated, and therefore open to various drifts and forces. Exhibitions are

milieux that are staged and ported within complexities — entanglements of material, technical, and social forces, often with an uncertain compass, generally incomprehensible, sometimes intelligible.

Crucially, a heterogeneity of time horizons nests within them – each of whom are contending and contesting each other, playing truant or violent games with each other. As we all now understand, these are in small measure human-engendered, but in large measure escape human agency.

About time horizons, a minor detour.

If you are in CERN in Geneva (as we were, recently), walking through accelerator tunnels and staring at solenoids in detectors, it is commonplace to hear of human beings' limited perception of space-time as an obstacle to a radical comprehension of the universe: Here time horizons bend to an incomprehensibility, that fraction, that millionth of the moment at the beginning, when matter and time emerged.

Or if you were in silent meditation session (which we step into sometimes), or under an influence of a psychotropic substance (which we step into sometimes), then to feel a loosening of the grip over your mind's ability to coherently formulate reality is commonplace. These are demanding experiments and experiences.

All of this to leads us back to the curatorial: it is an engagement with both the question of the milieu and the multiplicity of time-horizons.

Here, we would like to present a way of working that we have been trying to develop over the last decade so as to stake a claim in the building of a milieu. Let us begin with a *Scroll of Sources* for an exhibition. We shared this scroll with the artists we were in conversation with for the exhibition "In the Open or in Stealth" at MACBA, Barcelona last year. (2)

- A juggler's ability to make new images appear, a kind of afterimage, (early 20th century)
- An erotic print portraying the embrace of an octopus (1814)
- Harry Houdini's techniques of escape from confinement (1930)
- The laws of courtly love in early medieval Europe (1500)
- The emergence of suicidal tendencies in robots (2017)
- Our own delineation of a mathematical equation for forms of anacoustic reasons (2006)
- A notion of the unfolding of contiguous infinity in the performance of a raga, or mode, in Hindustani classical music (1997)
- And a glimmer of a radiance emanating from a reading of the gaps in the transition from human to automated labour in a worker's newspaper in a north Indian Factory town (2017)

This gathering of seemingly unrelated fragments constitutes and gestures to the making of a milieu. An archipelago of meanings and resonances ties them together — dexterity, liberation, limit, longing, utterance, love, fear, infinity and radiance all come together in a way that makes sense in the now, in the present. By themselves, each of these particular moments would be considered insignificant or minor or peripheral. But in their re-alignment and re-drawing through each other, they suspend a frame that acts as a riddle and an enigma, which further demands a sustained examination, elaboration and extension. An exhibition, then, becomes a specific rendering among many other possible renderings. It is one option among many options. It is not a unity that is searched for and consolidated, but a plurality of complexities, each drawing from each other and yet diverging from each other.

We quote from a text, “Upon the Fabricatory, In the Open or in Stealth, a Viewer Braids a Verse”, by Shveta Sarada, published in the online journal *Quaderns Portatils* (or QP for short) of the Museum of Contemporary Art Barcelona (MACBA). (3)

Confidence is tested; arguments for a retake on lost time unfold everywhere, at all times. These warrant an awareness of the present moment. Every new generation has to rethink its own ways out of the psychotropic force and nature of our attachment to this world. It has a grip that is both ingenious and cruel; it has to be re-crafted, reviewed and asked questions of. Its hold loosens, then grips, loosens again and grips again. And again. “And then a robot, scanning 360 degrees, hearing with its sensitive microphones, checking the air with its sensors, reviewing the images it has gathered, walked into a fountain. It let go, in solidarity with everything around it.”

A state change is possible because we have innumerable states within us. Being overpowered and forced from one state to another is what leaves us feeling ambushed, blindsided, dispossessed, and thus keeps not just us from ours, but also our worlds from their potential. And yet, we all also have uncountable moments when that tiny fraction within – which cannot be absorbed and which keeps up its whirling and its tending towards unintelligibility and illegibility, between remaining unfixed and becoming unplaceable – gathers force.

“Every island assumes other islands,” writes the Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant (4). We could paraphrase this to say: ‘Every source demands other sources’. From Glissant, we learn that archipelagic thought makes it possible to say that every kind of stance about being someone or something can change through exchange and contact with others, and that this does not necessarily lead to a loss of self.

For Glissant, the slave leaves a shore but returns as someone else—a free entity. She returns multiplied. The unity of enslaving wills gives way to the multiplicity of liberating will. The itinerary of the former slave changes the source from which the slave arose. That orbit—which produced some of the greatest poetry and music in the world—shows how the future transforms the way we see the past.

We learn the importance of the challenges of choosing our ancestors, of discovering our sources, of inventing fraternities and sororities, as we journey through life. Not all of us come from any one place or time. We find our way into and through subterranean caves of structures of thought and practice with giant crystalline lattices that might contain the codes of lost and dormant forms of life. To find dormant paths and new itineraries, somewhere we need to eschew inert themes and *post factum* taxonomies. Moves that would classify us by theme, or provenance, or for that matter, *telos*, need to be made inoperable, so that the sources may begin to speak in new dialects.

A profusion of sources, of seven billion people, could be discovered—some of these fictionally invented, and some activated as they lie hibernating, in wait. Just as the forest floor does not parcel out the benefits of its layers of compost according to the decomposition of individual fallen autumn leaves, so too, we recognize that the fertility of our time is a distributed milieu, made of many milieux.

To be within the “curatorial” is to witness within and around ourselves the collision of artistic forms and the diverse sources of world-making. There are head-on collisions, unforeseen accidents, jolts born of contact, eerie afterimages, and quiet readings that go against the grain of accepted interpretations.

At present, we are engaged in a yearlong process in Delhi, the city in which we live, and Kolkata, which lies a few hundred miles to the east, in conjunction with the Goethe Institutes. It is a project that we call “Five Million Incidents” (5), and in it, instead of being “curators” or “artistic directors”, we call ourselves “catalysts” of an unfolding situation and work with a collegium of mentors and custodians. We have set a process in motion, and now remain attentive to its chemistry as it unfolds.

To quote from the “Second call for proposals”: (6)

Five Million Incidents are underway. This undertaking is a thickening of space by time. This is why we foreground the idea of an incident, or an episode.

An incident is a fold in time: an occurrence, an encounter, a sighting, an event in time and in memory; a quickened heartbeat, an epiphany, a flash of insight, an outbreak of goose-bumps, a moment of excitement, an encounter with a person or an object that transforms the way you live or think, a conversation that carries a wake with it, an event that makes you rethink everything. An hour can be crowded with incidents, and years may pass without incident. Incidents depend on recognition, experience, sensory quickening, and alertness. They may also rely on slowing down, reflection, thoughtfulness, and ripeness. Thinking and interacting with incidents is a mode of conscious engagement with time.

Each artist produces her own interpretation of what an incident can be – sometimes it lasts an afternoon, sometimes a few months. Looked at another way, contact and confrontation, in art as in life, are occasions for the multiplication of generative misunderstandings, or a sort of generative collision. The “trans” in trans-disciplinarity (a term used in the title of the

original invitation which prompted us to give this talk) is suggestive, for us, of a fluid state of plasma between different modes of practice, thinking, and becoming. It asserts a non-assertion of primacy, even as it prioritizes different modes of doing, acting, thinking for different purposes, in a way that is always alert both to the specificity of a hosting context as well as the desire for a plurality of planetary horizons.

This form of curatorial “trans-action” is to know and hold an egalitarian, non-rivalrous stance between divergent, and occasionally even contrary, arcs of making, vision and utterance. We could think of these too as “sources”; they act like the water sources of a natural ecosystem—sometimes linked to each other through subterranean channels, sometimes isolated from each other, but at all times they act as nodes of sustenance, refreshment, and nourishment. Thus we allow them to be contagious and contiguous with each other. (7)

In the 2016 Shanghai Biennale, which we curated with the title “Why Not Ask Again”(8), we drew from the histories of cinema and science fiction to generate a conversation around the importance of precise historical moments within the second half of the 20th century. By asking questions of these sources, we were able to move into specific subjectivities and embark upon a philosophical quest. This was nested within a dance of ideas, memories, prophecies and images.

One of the ways in which an oppressive sense of historicity deprives us of agency is through a conscious or unconscious limitation on the kind of “sources” that can be accessed in the course of a contemporary practice or conversation. To us, the contemporary is a space in which we can all join the ridiculed and halted and mythopoeic marriage procession of Shiva, or *Bhole ki baraat*. (9) The god Shiva went to his wedding in a raucous procession. The wedding party included wild animals, outcasts of all kinds, ghosts, and goblins; these marchers had distorted, imperfect bodies, unresolved consciousnesses, and were in delirious moods and states of being. The story of Shiva’s wedding ends with Shiva being insulted by his in-laws for the character of his companions. Enraged, the god danced a dance of destruction, *tandava*, in response. Shiva could well have been Nietzsche’s favorite god.

Such processions will always find it difficult to enter the historical record, and by extension the museum. Rather, these unruly energies are detours. They take paths and seek connections that do not yet exist; they play with instruments whose sound has yet to find an amplifier. Biennales sit on that cusp that Hannah Arendt marked as the present--the indistinct zone between the “no longer” and the “not yet” (10). It is a tight rope dance, as in Paul Klee’s painting (11).

Upon our original sources of cinema and science fiction, we added the scaffolding of a “sensation of thought”. This further allowed the exhibition to become a creature that could argue and listen, speak with eloquence, tell riddles, express complexities, and be playful or taxing. Unhindered by immutable affirmations, the experience of the exhibition could be either personal or distant, depending on the trajectories of these discourses through the world of an individual mind.

Here we would like to go back to one of our own projects, which ~~even today seems to enjoy a second life and~~ has fertilized a great deal of our thinking on sources ~~and origins~~. The project was called “OPUS” (Open Platform for Unlimited Signification) (12), and at this point we think it interesting to share our memories of it.

“OPUS”, a do-it-yourself online platform, made a claim to the creation and sustenance of a potentially global digital commons. Just as the urban pioneers who squatted in unoccupied spaces created new zones of habitation in Delhi by extending the city’s commons, and as in accordance with the principles of free software--the freedom to download, modify, and redistribute--so too, OPUS users could create, extend, and maintain their corner of a digital commons by uploading, downloading, sharing, and transforming content in different media. A “ball” of cultural material could be “passed” and “tackled” by different players in a never-ending session of digital *ginga*.(13)

Each act of transforming or tagging a “source” media file contributed to the creation of what the OPUS system, borrowing a term from philology, called *Rescensions*. (14) *Rescensions* are non-rivalrous-iterations of clusters of signs which are related to each other through the acknowledgement of descent from a common source. This means that the system could draw visualizations of relationships between different objects based on word frequency distributions in the metatags.

If anything, the operational protocols of OPUS demonstrated that a source could never be viewed as a mere resource. A source does not simply lie inert like a seam of raw materials in the ground waiting to be mined and extracted. When we invoke a source, it is with an awareness of its already thickened life as well as of its potential efflorescence. A particular instance of rescension does not preclude or exclude the existence of other instances. When a plurality of rescensions derive themselves from more than one set of sources, the paths of their iterations collide and entangle with each other, creating thickets of meaning as they grow.

In time, even rescensions become new sources. When even one of these source-recensions miscegnates with another, it imbues “source-ness” with multiplicity, producing invented and inventive fraternities and sororities of affiliation. The paths of different rescensions are inflected by their fealties and their magnetic attractions towards different sources and their emanations.

This leads to curving, eccentric orbits, as rescensions travel in the space between different acts of creation and transformation. The tracing of these curving paths leads to the marking of a whole new set of relationships between widely dispersed actions. These relationships are constantly on the move - one can speak of them as having itineraries. A source, when it emits a rescension, also reveals an itinerary. Itineraries circulate and transport memes, images, and ideas with great energy, unimpeded by any blockages, since nothing stops them from entering into new combinations or finding new paths. As such, no particular source or rescension ever gets to dominate a system of linked meanings, affects or information.

And so the thicket grows.

The recently released *Sourcebook* (15) of the forthcoming Yokohama Triennale, which we are currently curating, is a gathering of sources, which embrace the formation of a milieu with ideas of care, toxicity, auto-didacticism, friendship, luminosity, persistence and radiance — all of which come together in a way that helps make sense of the now, in the now. The *Sourcebook* registers this attitude and records it as the curatorial framework's awareness of itself. One source opens the door to another, and then another, and another.

This *Sourcebook* learns from Nishikawa Kimitsu, a Yokohama day laborer (16), who embodies what it means to be a curious sojourner, an autodidact adrift in the universe. Elsewhere, it gleans from two historical itineraries on caring for the self and others. In 16th century Southern India, heavenly bodies, plants, minerals, animals, and angels fill the Deccani book *Nujum al 'ulum (Stars of the Sciences)* (17), which was written as a “medicine to care for the lives of friends”. And then, a hundred odd years ago, Hariprabha Mallik (18) departed a town in what is now Bangladesh to travel to Japan for the love of a stranger, Takeda Uemon. Her memoir dives into the creation of a farm and a kitchen as she traverses a foreign world.

Nishikawa's connection of the street to the cosmos, the “friendships” between the many forms of life and matter in the 16th century Deccani manuscript, and Hariprabha Takeda's journey all illuminate different corners of consciousness. They point to energies that irradiate co-existing and complex forms of life. The biologist Shimomura Osamu (19) has spent a lifetime researching the phenomenon of bio-luminescence. The theorist and writer Svetlana Boym seeks the luminosity of friendship in her essay, “The Scenography of Friendship.” (20)

To quote from our essay in the *Sourcebook*, where we speak of flickering light,

“A woman named Hariprabha Mallik left a village in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) to accompany a foreigner, the man she had fallen in love with, an itinerant merchant named Takeda. She sailed with him to Japan and found herself in a new world, which surprised and delighted her. She knew next to no Japanese and at first could only communicate in silence. Her encounters with the family and friends of the man she had travelled half the world to be with, left a mark on her. To us, they seem lit by a light of a woman teaching herself to become a part of a new world.”

A friend, the artist and philosopher Svetlana Boym, wrote about a kind of light in her essay “Scenography of Friendship”.

“In circumstances of extremity... illuminations do not come from philosophical concepts but from the ‘uncertain, flickering and often weak light’ that men and women kindle and shed over the lifespan given to them. This luminous space where ‘men and women come out of their origins and reflect each other's sparks’ is the space

of humaneness and friendship that sheds light on the world of appearances we inhabit. In other words, friendship is not about having everything illuminated or obscured, but about conspiring and playing with shadows. Its goal is not enlightenment but luminosity, not a quest for the blinding truth but only for occasional lucidity and honesty.”

Hariprabha wrote:

“One by one many people came to meet us. Young or old, they took off their caps, sat on folded knees and bowed to each other in greetings. They introduced themselves, greeted each other, asked about our health, gave thanks and expressed their joy at meeting us. At each exchange of question and answer, it was expected to bow three or four times to each other.

Since I knew no Japanese, I bowed silently.”

If you do not know how to say something to a stranger, you can still glow, as one does sweating after a day’s labour. Or you may ~~even~~ simply share your shadow with them, creating an outline of light in the narrow space where your shadow shies away from meeting theirs. A form of knowledge grows out of the jostling of untranslatable experiences.

[A version of this text was delivered as a Keynote Talk at *Contemporary Curating Rethink: In the Context of Asia and Beyond*: Taipei Fine Art Museum, Taipei, October 2019]

NOTES

(1) *The 10 Books I Needed to Write My Novel*, Ocean Vuong, *Literary Hub*, October 2019
<https://lithub.com/ocean-vuong-the-10-books-i-needed-to-write-my-novel/>

(2) For more on *The Scroll of Sources* at *In the Open or in Stealth*, curated by Raqs Media Collective, MACBA, Barcelona see *Interview with Jeebesh Bagchi* by Rosalyn D’Mello in the blog of Experimenter Kolkata Curatorial Hub
<https://experimenter.in/2018-conversation-with-jeebesh-bagchi.html>

(3) *Upon the Fabricatory, In the Open or In Stealth, A Viewer Braids a Verse* by Shveta Sarda
https://img.macba.cat/public/uploads/publicacions/quaderns_portatils/QP_36_InTheOpen_F4.pdf

(4) *Poetic Intention*, Edouard Glissant, translated by Nathanaël, Night Boat Books, 2010

(5) *Five Million Incidents: Second Call for Proposals*
https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf183/2nd-call-for-proposals_fmi.pdf
For More Information on *Five Million Incidents* at the Goethe Institut - Delhi & Kolkata

<https://www.goethe.de/ins/in/en/kul/sup/fmi.html>

(6) *Why Not Ask Again*: 11th Shanghai Biennale – e-flux Announcement

<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/61969/why-not-ask-again-arguments-counter-arguments-and-stories/>

(7) For a more detailed discussion on rescension, see *Sources, Itineraries, and the Making of a Thicket*, Raqs Media Collective, Decolonizing Art Institutions, On Curating, Issue 35

<https://www.on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/sources-itineraries-and-the-making-of-a-thicket.html#.XmDczxMzZPM>

(8) *Why Not Ask Again. Curator's Statement*, Raqs Media Collective

http://www.shanghaibiennale.org/en/exhibition/year_topic/92.html

(9) For *Bhole ki Baarat* (Shiva's wedding procession), see

<http://utkarshspeak.blogspot.com/2011/03/lord-shivas-wedding-procession.html>

For more on Siva's wedding procession in Classical Indian Sculpture see also *The Presence of Siva*, by Stella Kramrisch, Motilal Banarasidass, 1988

(10) 'No Longer and Not Yet', Hannah Arendt, *Nation*, September 1946, re-published in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, by Hannah Arendt. Edited and with an Introduction by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, Stanford University Press, 2007

(11) For more on Paul Klee's painting, *Tightrope Walker*, see *The Way Back Down: Paul Klee's Heights and Depths*. David Farrell Krell, *Research in Phenomenology*, 43 (3), 2013

(12) For entries on *Rescension* and other terms, see *A Concise Lexicon of/for The Digital Commons*, Raqs Media Collective

http://www.ocopy.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/raqs-media-collective_a-concise-lexicon-of-for-the-digital-commons.pdf

(13) For more on ginga, see Ed Hart's review of Rui Castro's Documentary Film on Brazilian Football: *Ginga – The Soul of Brazilian Football (2014)*

<https://soundsandcolours.com/articles/brazil/ginga-the-soul-of-brazilian-football-23805/>

(14) *Announcement and Brief History of OPUS* by Raqs Media Collective

http://www.cyberartsweb.org/sg_sea/Opus.html

(15) *Sourcebook: Yokohama Triennale 2020, Afterglow*

https://raqsmediacollective.net/sourcebook_en.pdf

(16) For Kimitsu Nishikawa, see *Yokohama Street Life: The Precarious Career of a Japanese Day Laborer*, Tom Gill, Asia World Series of Publications, Lexington Books, London, 2015

(17) *Bongomohilar Japan Jatra* (a Bengali Woman's Voyage to Japan) by Hariprabha Takeda, first published in Dhaka, 1915. Reprinted by Sahitya Prakash Publishers, dhaka, 1999. English translation from the Bengali by Debjani Sengupta, commissioned for Yokohama Triennale 2020.

(18) *Nujūm al-'ulūm (Stars of the Sciences)*, Chester Beatty Collection, Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. For more on the Nujūm al-'ulūm see also *The Authorship and Significance of the Nujūm al-'Ulūm: a Sixteenth-Century Astrological Encyclopedia from Bijapur*, Emma Flatt, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 131, no. 2 (April–June 2011)

(19) *Advice to Students Who Are Interested In Studying the Chemistry of Bioluminescence*, Osamu Shimomura, *Bioluminescence: Chemical Principles and Methods*, World Scientific Publishing, Singapore, 2006

(20) *Scenography of Friendship* Svetlana Boym, *Cabinet* Issue 36, 'Friendship' (Winter 2009–2010). Available online at <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/boym.php>