Vol. 15 | 2011 International Yearbook of Aesthetics

Gimme Shelter

Global Discourses in Aesthetics

edited by Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall

International Association for Aesthetics
Association Internationale d'Esthetique

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10 Within the flux of the contemporary

In conversation with the Raqs Media Collective

Parul Dave Mukherji

In 1992 when Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narulla and Shuddhabrata Sengupta formed the Raqs Media Collective, Indian economy and politics were undergoing unprecedented convulsions. It coincided with several key shifts in economy and politics that left far reaching repercussions in the art world as well as civil society in India. With the fall of the Berlin Wall behind them, global capitalism now operated in an increasingly uni-polar world. This period witnessed the massive expansion of information technology that was going to radically transform the public sphere in India.

Not being part of an art school, RMC did not feel encumbered by the baggage that every art student had to carry. Trained as media specialists at a prominent media practice department, they were tuned to the changed times shaped by mass media. They experimented with the language of moving images and their foray into the cultural scene was via documentaries that queried the very genre of the documentary.

At the time of their engagement with film making in 1992, the globalized economy had unleashed communal forces in civil society with increasing withering of the secular ethos of Nehruvian socialism. It was within the charged ambience of unprecedented changes in civil society that these three students of the Media Studies centre joined hands. With their participation in Documenta 11 in 2002 they made their entry into the art world. With media as their middle name, they signal a break from art practices that had until then had largely defined the art world via the traditional medium of painting and sculpture. Unlike any other collective, theirs was predicated on disavowal of two modalities of art practice that are intricately interwoven- claims of individual authorship and national identity.

Unburdened by the legacy of the past, the RMC broke fresh ground by their very rejection of the authorial voice, on one hand, and the *avant garde* function of the artist, on the other. The latter had a fraught presence in the history of modern Indian art, and underpinned the elitist status of Indian modernists who would often self-consciously distance themselves from 'the people' and acknowledge the public mainly as a subject matter in art works.

By embracing a collective identity that was free of individual subjectivity a 'Indian' identity, the RMC broke out of the constraint of a given temporality and spatiality dictated by the national modern and ventured into the space of the global on their own terms.

In their video, *The Capital of Accumulation*, the critique of capitalism is not carried out from a distance as a thematic of representation alone but envisaged through intertwined histories that bring cities of Berlin, Mumbai and Warsaw on the same page. Capitalism is not an entity anchored to a given territory but seen a movement of capital, people, goods and images. Declaring that nations now exis in a state of ruin, they zero in on cities as nodes of capitalist accumulation and encounter between nature and culture; whether it is the migratory birds in search o new habitat or the animals in the Berlin Zoo, they turn their gaze at political events demanding accountability of human excesses. With ecology entering the frame, the cartography of the world changes taking on a planetary dimension. It causes the world to shrink, pulling different regions together in closer connectivity that leave little room for large ethnic labels like 'Indian' and 'Western' to hang on its surface. In place of thick labels of nationality and ethnicity, there will only be thin tenuous lines on their personalized globe which criss-cross to index their journeys and projects. These lines of network, being real and fictitious at the same time, are open to translation into, say, a woven carpet that marks their journeys in a different register of reality, at once concrete and virtual.

With media defining their practice, it was a space clearing gesture in a way that distinguished their art practice from the ontological stability of any autographic form. As media practitioners, the very basis of representation that assumes a distance between the agent and object of representation gets upturned as do simple notions of activism. In their practice, the RCM refuses the division between text and images and their activism remains grounded in the synaesthesia of seeing and hearing. If there is a place for the political, it lies in the privileging of listening over viewing. If conventional activism is equated with seeing and the mastery of the gaze that sets apart the activist from the public where action speaks louder than words, theirs is the activism of intense listening that is as attentive to speech as it is to silence.

1 *As far as I know, your foray into the art world was through documentaries. I know you all don't subscribe to the standard notion of activism and perhaps intervention is more appropriate here. What are your thoughts on activism?*

The Viennese satirist Karl Kraus once said: "Those who now have nothing to say because actions are speaking continue to talk. Let him who has something to say come forward and be silent." We think silence is not given its due in the world. Silence is important, because you can't listen effectively if there is no space created through silence around any given instance of speech. Though we use text and words quite often, we have often preferred to work through en ethic of listening rather than speaking in our work. If at all we could be described as activists, then the only way would be to see (or hear) us as 'activist listeners'.

Art cannot stop wars, end hunger, reverse global warming, bring about democracy or socialism, end racism, sexism or homophobia. What art can do is to deepen and sharpen our intellectual and emotional responses to our time, our lives and our world, and this desired depth and acuteness can perhaps lay the foundation for a more considered, more thoughtful, more just and open way of living in the world.

2 *Time is a category forever under erasure in many of your works. It is something that you are always pulling apart in many of your projects and yet it spurs your critical space. You often take 'time' as something 'foldable' into space, into geography (my favourite is THE SURFACE OF EACH DAY IS A DIFFERENT PLANET- the title of your Tate Britain installation) Do you see in this inflection a possible critique of the logic of global capitalism when time meanders in different directions and folds back into itself and almost slows it down?*

There is a section towards the end of *The Capital of Accumulation* where we see thousands of rose-hued flamingoes foraging on the marsh at Sewri at the edge of Bombay. We are told that someday soon there will be a six lane highway that will cut through this marshland, and that a new city, an SEZ will rise, not in six years or in six hundred, but perhaps in a time that spans just six months. The flamingoes, however, seem to be in no hurry to give way to this six lane highway to a six month city. They feed and forage to a different rhythm.

We say here – "The earth moves sluggishly, and life takes its time, to grow, to move, to fly, to mate, to nest, to feed, even to die. Capital needs a swifter wobble about the planetary axis, shorter seasons, brief lunch breaks, a snappier interval between one working day and another, something more pliable than that slow, variable capital, that wet mass called humans."

But the planet isn't going to deliver a faster wobble to Capital. The rotation of the earth, its orbit around the sun, the circuits of the moon and stars, the flight paths of migratory birds, these rhythms, and the rhythms that constitute the ebb and flow of life on earth, do not yet follow the time-table of Capital. Our work is an exploration of the discrepancies between these different kinds of temporal patterns. The fact that we can recognize this relationship as a discrepant, dissonant one means that if you are attentive to the beats of different clocks, there is no escaping the possibility of a critique of capital, on temporal terms. The swifter wobble is not going to happen.

Our thinking on time and things temporal occurs under the twin signs of interruption and potential. Interruptions interfere with the flow of the way things are, potentials point to how they might yet be. Both these tendencies can be seen at work (and at play) such as in *The Afternoon Unregistered on the Richter Scale* and *36 Planes of Emotion*. In the first, an interruption takes the form of the un-freezing of an archival photograph, and in the second, we extend the palette of emotions to include states of potential actualized through an assemblage of phrases, surfaces and transparencies that evoke a cluster of invented collective nouns. The nouns name the feelings we know we can have only when we consider the coupling and prolif-

eration of ways of being. Either way, what gets triggered is an insurgency of [illegible] possibilities, tremors that are sharp yet far too subtle to register on a Richter scale. Our play with words, light and electricity, sign language, archival traces, counting exercises are all a search for an insurgent reading of time.

3 *Again, it is temporality that opens up the question of the archive. Archive in contemporary art practice has acquired multiple meanings – archive as an official record of the past, as gaps to be revisited, as repository of collective memory, as the space of the counterfactual. How does 'archiving' as a verb relate to your practice? How is it aided by technology that you opt for?*

We are living in the very beginning of the 21st century, and the twentieth century was a heavy, heavy time. It was like 5 centuries in one. The twentieth century was a century about pushing people in to oblivion. If you survive the twentieth century, as all of us have, then we think that you are in a condition where you really have to reflect on what happened. So it is not a surprise to us that a lot of contemporary art nowadays turns to history, deals with archives, investigation of memory and so on. This is perhaps a necessary task at the moment. It may not always be, but right now it seems like something we all need to be doing.

But it would be incorrect to say that this means that contemporary art is somehow in the thrall of the past. Any attempt to look outside the limitations of the present will take one in the direction of other possibilities. Here, the present is a reference, and the past and the future are directions in which the outward gaze travels. The point is not that we are all fascinated by the past; rather it is that we are not blinded by the present. This leaves us all free to explore the record of times past as well as the dreams of times future. And these outward moves, in turn, allow us to look at the present. Because one can only look at the present as an object if one can position oneself away from it.

We excavate the archives, and we make time capsules. This means that we create archives in the past and posit archives for the future. The thing is, as people who constantly annotate each other, we are the witnesses to the generation of our own electronic archive, on a daily basis. Someday, the many hard drives and computers that surround us, and the works that we have made, scattered across the world, will have to be accounted for as the reservoirs of our collective memory, of our collective's memory.

In the early '90s our studio had a machine that was used by many of our friends and comrades. It was a modest production site for research notes, for writing proposals, projecting scenarios, for producing booklets on work and political economy, essays, criticism, correspondence, catalogues, etc. This poor, overworked machine went through various disruptions – crashes, version changes, incompatibility issues, upgrades and new software. During the course of one of the crashes we found that the data in the machine became progressively 'chewed' with each successive attempt to re-start the computer. All we have today from that world are inchoate memories, the beginnings of a few processes, a few completed works and

scattered printouts of the twisted thread of productive acts. We are still coming to terms with the fact that the readings, arguments and practices of a decade are now only a bit of illegible digital residue. So, as you can see, we have experienced the fact that time does not move in a smooth linear transition from the past to the future at first hand. We know that this can happen again. It is within this flux, around its tilts, crests and troughs that we try to create work, live and have our conversations.

4 *Contemporary artist as ethnographers has by now become a tired label. Your cross-cultural entry into another country is often through a metropolitan city. All cities at night look almost indistinguishable from an aerial perspective. Does cartography then offer a useful lens to map urban landscape? Does it work to bring make distant places come closer or inversely the familiar, uncanny?*

From topology, a sub-branch of mathematics, we learn that it takes just four colours to make a map of the world. A map is always a reduction, an abstraction. A map takes a complex reality and tells a story about its terrain using minimal elements. If we never confuse the map for the territory, we get a sense of the lay of the land. When we look at cities, we view what surrounds us, not as planners would, but as detectives and fabulists. We read maps as one would a crime novel. We draw them as one would pictures in a fable. As diagrams, maps are representational machines, we can annotate space to mark it for common elements, and divide a place into all its constituent parts. All these are ways of telling stories, with co-incidences and parallels, with place for distinction and room for echoes, with one hand always held out in greeting towards all that is uncannily familiar or obliquely strange.

5 *Biographies of cities inflect personal memories. In* The Capital of Accumulation, *the parallel lives of two or three cities unfold through the interspaces between nature and culture, environment and politics in Berlin, Warsaw, Mumbai. How is the split screen a useful device? The line in between always keeps the focus on the framing of the narratives and makes visible that which is meant to elude vision.*

The split screen in *The Capital of Accumulation* is not a device to produce distinction between cities. It is not there to put Bombay on the right screen and Berlin on the left screen, thereby creating a platform of comparisons. The split screen is there to do the precise opposite: For the logic of the work to override the possibility of contrast and comparison. For Berlin, Bombay and Warsaw to be seen as strands that weave in and out of each other rather than as peaks to be distributed across the work. Also, two screens evoke a book. What you have read and what awaits in anticipation is always in front of you as two simple pages.

6 *You have long exploded the framework of the national modern since the late 1990s when Raqs Media Collective began to acquire visibility in the contemporary art scene. While the national modern is increasingly brought under contestation within the country, the international exhibitionary spaces continue to hold on to it even in current globalized times. How do you negotiate with this when asked to curate an exhibition of contemporary art in the West?*

The curatorial and artistic impulses we work with do not require us to gesture towards the nation. We work with questions that are both more precise as well as more open than nationalism can allow for. When we were asked to curate a section of Manifesta: The European Biennial of Contemporary Art, in Bolzano (Italy) in 2008, we were clear that we were not going to do a 'representation' of Europe, even from the notional outside. What we were interested in doing was to use the opportunity to curate a Biennial to investigate a set of questions that we had been interested in. These centered around the generative power of that which is usually considered to be residue or residual. *The Rest of Now* – the exhibition that came out of this process – was able to address Europe as the residue of the history of Industrial Capitalism, and to imagine how the residual could be retrieved as a generative space. It did that not by obsessing with Europe or European-ness, but by investigating the dynamics of residue. Let us say that Europe is a giant abandoned factory (we were working in precisely such a factory as our site in Bolzano). In any abandoned industrial facility there is an amazing proliferation of biodiversity – strange plants, quiet animals and many kinds of micro-organisms. An abandoned industrial facility, in biological terms, is anything but a wasteland. We were interested in what was growing through the concrete. We can take this metaphor and extend it to gesture to how one can think about constructions and edifices such as nationalism. Nationalism is a ruin. The thing to do, if passing time in the ruin, or in its vicinity, is not to try and restore it, but to look for the life forms that are generated by the very abandonment of the ruin. Our approach to the question of nationalism, national identity and other identity tropes is to approach them as ruins, and then to look for, and work with what is growing in the shadow of the ruin. These forms of life, not the ruin, will determine the future.

7 *From being labeled as uncritical globalists, now the RMC is seen as cutting edge theorists. What brought about this shift in perception?*

Transiting between labels that are not (and never were) of our own choosing feels strange. We follow our curiosities, doubts and passions. Perhaps the term 'cutting edge' is not a very useful one. After all, we are people, not knives, axes, *rampuri richakus*[1], shaving blades or lawn mowers!

We do not privilege anchorage, nor is there an albatross of vagabondage hung around our neck. Our attitude to the global is a matter of fact, not of fancy. The world is global today, it has been global before. There are differences in power between locations, but these are offset by differences in power, within locations. The crucial question is the choice of a critical compass with which to orient oneself to power, wherever it comes from and howsoever it operates, not a mental subordination to the co-ordinates of location.

Perhaps the shift in perception regarding us that you gesture towards has come about because some of the things we have been quietly insisting on, such as the

1 Locally made knife.

necessity to see nationalism and the nation-state for the ruin that it is, has now become more acceptable today than it was in the nineties of the twentieth century or even in the early years of this century, at least in our milieu. No nation state, not even the most powerful one, such as the United States, is anything but a wreck today. There is a grudging, but widespread acceptance of the implications of this reality in our times that cuts across an ever widening spectrum of views and positions. This was more or less inevitable, so it does not come to us as a surprise.

8 *Aesthetics and politics intersected in your work long before Ranciere's meditation on the subject. In your interview with Moinak Biswas, you have stated about your association of art with plenitude. What implication does this have for politics then?*

First of all, it means forging a politics with means other than resentment and by situating one's political subjectivity on grounds other than victimhood. It means recognizing that the abundance within our lives, not the poverty of our circumstances, is the true engine of transformation. It also means a cessation of building up the adversary by magnifying its power, or by denying one's own agency. Much of radical politics today suffers from aggrandizing the opposition, and wedded to a perverse self-denial. The paranoia that rules today's radicals' psychologies consists in endowing the state and corporations with much greater repressive means than they actually possess. Life is still far more diverse, far more insubordinate, far more pleasurable and full of meaning than it would be if the dystopic diagnoses of the present were actually true. This means that the supposedly 'apolitical' subjects – the people that self styled radicals like to call 'the inert masses' – are actually not yet defeated by capital. We think that in the last couple of years there has been a tectonic shift in global consciousness. Movements – like what happened (and is continuing to happen) in Tahrir Square in Cairo, in Athens, Madrid, London and Tel Aviv or in the rash of 'occupy' initiatives in the United States and elsewhere, are indicative of a clear difference.

The coming decade is going to be one of profound turbulence. For the first time in recent history, factory occupations (that came from outside the mainstream of the trade union movement) in India, were actually able to translate their desires into a degree of reality. This happened outside the spotlight that was focused on Anna Hazare, his 'team' and his opposition. Something is changing, and we think it has to do with people realizing a realistic measure of their own powers, unrestrained by the conventional language of politics and mobilization. Perhaps this 'apolitical' generation will turn out to be the most cannily political after all. All of this has to do with an enjoyment of the multitude's sense of its own abundances.

9 *Is it possible to view* The Utopia Station *for the Venice Biennale as site specific? An island within an island? Does it engender both an event and a discourse? Is it imagined as a place for the unexpected guest (Atithi) as in a Sarai? To turn to* Utopia into a Hearing Aid, *you had to let the ear take the place of the eyes.*

The Utopia Station project (as imagined by its curators – Molly Nesbit, Rikrit Tiravanija and Hans Ulrich Obrist) has had from the very beginning a nomadic character. Its site-specificity includes its willingness to move from the site, when required, every time. It has stationed itself in the Venice Biennale, it stationed itself in the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre at one time, in University contexts, in theatres and in museums. It may take different forms in the future. But in each instance, our understanding is that it tries to create food for the eyes, the mind, the soul and the political and ethical senses. Any such platform (and you are not incorrect in attaching Sarai in a broader sense to this set of possibilities) has to be prepared to be surprised. It has to make room for the unexpected, the unplanned for, the unexpected guest – the one who comes without warning or intimation of his date of arrival – his *tithi*- the *Atithi*. We think that any initiative that tries to take what is positive in the utopian impulse (and not everything utopian is necessarily positive) has at the very least to be prepared to welcome that which can transform its very being. What good would an Utopia (which is always a challenge to the present to change) be if it were not prepared to challenge itself to change. When we founded Sarai we were searching for a space for the hospitality for this spirit that was willing to be transformed even as it sought to transform what was around it. That is why the metaphor of Sarai was useful and apt, as a space for the care of what is as yet un-thought of. No Sarai would work without its *musafirs*, its *atithis*, its guests.

Often, the first signs and intimations of the change that is already at work are not the ones that make themselves visible. If they were visible, they would cease to exist. That is why to be open to Utopia also means being prepared to listen more carefully than usual. The change that we seek in the world may be already afoot, but it might be that we cannot yet see it, because it does not want to be seen. That is why we need to cultivate a careful and fearless form of listening. To let our retinas rest once in a while and use utopia as our hearing aid.

10 *Often, your works creates a dialogue between text and image* – Utopia is a Hearing Aid, *and in quite the same way in* Surjection *where the slow dance like gesture of the hand as a seductive image that cohabits with colonial surveillance and the history of forensics. However, there are more conceptual, text based works that eschew images and turn words into sensuous ensembles as lit up in* Reading Light, *an installation at the Oscar Niemeyer's building in Paris. How do you arrive at decisions that pitch the work along the broad spectrum of words and images?*

For us, words are images, and images can be read and written, even if one does not use words to inscribe them. The work of art does not happen on the surface of an object. It happens within the neural circuitry of the brain and within the layers of consciousness, within the folds of memory and prophecy. The eyes are the only visible part of the brain, that is why they tend to dominate our vision, but we forget that the skin too is a sense organ, a platform where nerve endings cluster and proliferate, a surface of our mind. We find goose pimples interesting, because they are episodes when the skin is thinking. Our desire is to make the skin think (and

hopefully not crawl), the eyes feel, the ears read and the mind dance. That is why we make art.

That is why we are so interested in the notion of the 'after-image', in what you see in your consciousness when your eyes have stopped seeing something. We are also interested in synaesthesia, in the crossing of the wires between the senses. In seeing sound, hearing light, reading touch. The brain does not discriminate between words, sounds, tactile sensations and images, it treats them all equally, albeit differently, and sometimes it scrambles the senses, or plays with them, in dreams, memories and hallucinations.

Being a triangulation of brains and minds, the signals that travel within our extended neural network often bounce and ricochet in unexpected ways. Sometimes what began as a word or a phrase in one of our minds becomes an image when it is received or transmitted by another, and then transformed into a potential object by the third, and so on. We have a sense, born of habit and practice, of when to make this work of relaying take a pause and then about when to send it out in the world. All of our work is a continuing game, a continuing set of branching, interlocking, interweaving investigations. Sometimes it becomes necessary to realize something textually, at other times, the trigger that started the ball of an idea rolling takes it into a purely imagistic, or phatic direction. Sometimes it becomes necessary to be analytical, at other times we can work quite frankly with sentiment and feeling, at sometimes we are annotative, at other times we make work that engenders annotations in the future. It all depends on what the voltage is in the neural circuit, and on the state of play between our minds.

11 *In discussions around public sphere, you have preferred 'crowd' to 'public' or rather public in flux – as missing or yet to come. Does not this view of the public have a utopian dimension – a notion of projective future that you strongly reject elsewhere? Or is this public already there waiting for the right mode of address to make itself visible in the post media world?*

We are interested in the crowd – not as a description, but as an invocation – as a call for people to gather. A public is one that already knows what it has gathered for. The things we are interested in do not involve a received, already available understanding of what it means to stand, or to stand together. We are interested in uncertainties of all kinds, including the uncertainty of mobilization, and the mobilization of uncertainty. This is not a matter of waiting to form the 'right mode of address' – or of endless loops of rhetorical trial and error in preparation of the magic slogan that will suddenly transform people into willing and ready publics. Of course this involves a notion of projective futures, but we are fully aware that this future is something that has to be produced, by the wills of people who will seldom act in concert with each other. So it is a matter of investigating the isotopes of collective consciousness, things that have resonant chemical properties even if they differ in their masses.

12 *Today the global is privileged in much contemporary art practice including yours. How is the global different from the earlier cosmopolitan that informed much of twentieth century art practice?*

That which you call cosmopolitan was the yearning of a thin slice of a displaced bohemian diaspora, at home nowhere, for an acute corner of the real estate of bohemia, as found scattered in splinters and splices, in municipal districts and post-code zones of some cities. Today, we are living and working in a very different set of circumstances. Of course, artists travel a great deal (artists have always travelled, what has altered is the scale, frequency and intensity of journeys) but the art world is no longer looking for *qiblain* (cardinal points towards which to pay homage). But artists of our generation, say those living and practicing in a city like Delhi, would not easily think of migrating, to Paris or London or Berlin (or even Bombay). This means that we are confident that our location is not a handicap to our production of a global discourse. It also means that we offer few explanations for who we are and what we do.

We are speaking to the world from where we stand also because we are engaged in an intense conversation with the city where we happen to live. At the same time, our peers, our audience, our public is frankly, here and everywhere. We are citizens of our time, not of the postal zones and country codes that tag us. And this is true of everyone of our generation in the art world today.

We have to concede, though, that this is something still being thought through in the art-world, and an adequate understanding of its possibilities and implications as well as a conceptual mobilization is still under process.

13 *While whirling around the world like contemporary dervishes fits your nomadic life style and self description as "Raqs", your relationship to Delhi as a location has a special resonance to your practice.*

Delhi is a good place to whirl from and to whirl back to and to whirl in. There is a tradition about Mehrauli, in Delhi, being the centre of the world. The Iron Pillar that never rusts next to the Qutab Minar in Mehrauli is said to mark the 'axis mundi'. It reaches deep underground, impaling Vasuki, the mythic world-snake, making sure it doesn't stir, and the world does not come tumbling down. We like this image. It's nice to live in a city that keeps the world balanced on the head of a quivering snake. Delhi is a palimpsest, a city of the future and the past, tangential to the present. It suits our time-travelling proclivities. We feel at home here, because we are at home, at large, in the world.