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Melissa Karmen Lee, Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta

ASAP/Journal, Volume 3, Number 2, May 2018, pp. 187-202 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0008>



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PROTEST AS POLYPHONY:

AN INTERVIEW WITH RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

The practice of curation amounts to a gathering of forces. A host unto itself, Raqs Media Collective is already one such gathering. Bringing together the artists JEEBESH BAGCHI, MONICA NARULA, and SHUDDHABRATA SENGUPTA, Raqs is a Delhi-based collective that has produced contemporary art, edited books, curated exhibitions, and staged situations since making its international debut in 2002. Together, these artists have interrogated totalitarian systems and evaluated epicenters of transformation with an active and relentless questioning. Founded in 1992 in New Delhi—a year after the group had studied documentary filmmaking together—Raqs Media Collective has produced a body of



Figure 1.
Raqs Media Collective (left to right): Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagchi, and Monica Narula. Photograph by Amalia Jyran Dasgupta.

artwork that includes multimedia installations, documentary films, edited books of poetry, an online app for invitations to participatory revolt, and numerous curatorial projects and exhibitions. The collective has also collaborated with a wide range of cultural workers, including architects, computer programmers, writers, and theater directors.

In 2001, Raqs co-founded *Sarai*, the interdisciplinary and incubatory space at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. Here, it initiated cultural practices and processes that have left a deep impact on contemporary Southeast Asia. Raqs's dialectical engagement with history interrogates the legacy of colonialism by refusing to limit the story of postcolonial cultural "development" either to patriarchal storytelling or to capitalist, neoliberal socio-economic models; its institutional work, like its artistic and curatorial projects, draws upon new ways of understanding the past in order to take action in the present. Raqs has always been interested in breaching hegemony and power; its means of doing so often involve gathering together and presenting new genealogies of radical thought. Its 2010 installation, *The Capital of Accumulation*, a video diptych that "trawls through a haunting, dreamlike landscape straddling Warsaw, Berlin, and Bombay/Mumbai" to critique the contemporary global political economy, features Rosa Luxemburg's 1913 text "The Accumulation of Capital" as its centerpiece, along with Luxemburg's botanical notebooks.¹ Raqs discusses its dialectical recourses to such texts in this interview, referring to them as "detours" that derail the constituted power and patriarchal dominance over culture, economy, traditions, and social norms. Another pertinent example of such postcolonial engagement with the dominant historical narrative of "development" is *Coronation Park*, a suite of nine fiberglass sculptures on coated wooden pedestals that was produced for the 56th Venice Biennale. These were fragments of ceremonial regalia that referenced the Delhi site that hosted the coronation of King George and Queen Mary as emperor and empress of India in 1911.

In this interview, Raqs discusses how its work seeks to redefine commonplace notions of both time and space. Its work addresses "threshold time" (which Raqs defines in shorthand as "the future-in-the-present") as well as the space

of art's performance—namely, biennales and national exhibitions increasingly located in Asia but focusing on a polyphony of world voices. Both domains involve intervening in evolving definitions of art within institutional frameworks that are under pressure from new technologies, a pressure that unfolds into protests against colonialism, capitalism, and political systems. An example of artwork that interrogates patriarchal systems as well as racial and historical legacies in the U.S. is *Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence*, which featured an indoor installation of photographs and books addressing the problematic issue of dealing with the history of wealth displacement in World's Fairs and, in particular, the reductive view of race they have tended to display as capitalist spectacles. Similarly, Raqs's outdoor exhibition, *If the World is a Fair Place, Then* (2015)—a participatory artwork that gathered and repurposed over five hundred individual responses in Laumeier Sculpture Park—examined the ideas of “fairness” and “unfairness,” signifiers most commonly associated with issues of race and class. Its *The Great Bare Map App* was an immersive artist book project created with a team for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston; the project interspersed archival stories and interview fragments with the work of the Collective at the museum in order to stimulate new ways of thinking about interactions with museum archives.

Deeply interested in and committed to plural collective life, Raqs Media Collective explores the notion of an art commons. Raqs connects new worlds with old, at once reintegrating popular media with public space, cyberspace with artistic and urban communities. It is intent upon analyzing and unmasking contemporary urban life in India—as well as throughout the world—but avoids the nihilism or pastiche of older postmodernist critique. Through cross-disciplinary conversations, it instead explores how mediated space embodies human desire and need through the locations of memory, as well as through the dislocations of displacement. In our interview, Raqs emphasizes the importance of collaboration and dialogue—of people working together toward change—and the need to “transmit, receive, and transform” the ecological and the algorithmic together, as if in one breath. The collective maintains in its practice a strong commitment to diverging from older versions of reason and power; it seeks instead to redefine the very rules of engagement themselves in foregrounding freedom of expression and making knowledge freely available.

—Melissa Karmen Lee

MELISSA KARMEN LEE/ *I wonder if we can begin by examining protest, and how the very specificity of this action often compels artists to become reactive toward unfolding historical events. In your opinion, how does protest demand new iterations of the way artists—as well as audiences, spectators, critics, institutions, and the art market—approach the very practice of art-making?*

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE/ A tension between the aesthetic and the constituted political is not a novel phenomenon. In a discussion on the dramatic arts and the State in the *Laws*, Plato (in the voice of the “Athenian”) makes an argument. He says that the State is a performer of tragedies, a storyteller, and that all citizens need a good story. In this sense, the State itself is the artist *par excellence*, and this is why it can brook no artistic rivals, no competition. There must be only one story, one work of art, one work of statecraft; and the State must be its sole creator.²

In the court of Magadha, Kautilya made a similar argument through his political treatise, *Arthashastra*. He was suspicious of artists, and thought of them as fabricators, as deceitful, and as an emotive distraction from the power of the State’s own presence, production, and narration. Sibaji Bandopadhyay writes in his essay, “The Laughing Performer”:

All in all, *Arthasāstra* depicts the *kuśīlava* [artist] as being a composite of the thief and the whore. . . . There is this

suspicion that, although the art of entertainment is legally sanctioned, it has a criminal edge to it. It is as if the *kuśīlava*’s body emits such strong surges of emotive currents that they may even seduce the level-headed—and if the seductive spell gets to be lasting, it may even turn the toiling man into a penny or *pana*-less pauper. But then, it is equally true, the most dutiful and docile of citizens too, has, at odd moments, the (fleeting) urge to give up on the world; made physically tired by the task of ceaseless reproduction of the conditions of production, he cannot but pass through (seasonal) bouts of depression. So, how should the over-seers of state—“state” being the structure emblematic of the dominant conditions of production—manage the mental health of the common man?³

Like many, our practice of art-making is to invert this relationship of suspicion and proscriptio. Art does collide with narrative claims of rulers and their experts. Having just one story at hand is worse than having none at all. When one story ends, the executioner draws his sword. That is why Scheherazade’s storytelling does not stop at the narrative potential of a single night.

MKL/ *You suggest that one must react or protest against singular State narratives. But what are the processes through which one can*

act? To put it another way: how can a citizen produce counternarratives?

RMC/ The tales of Layla and Majnun, and Heer-Ranjha, which address and remember the indifference of love to the realities of a cruel world, or the Marsiyas and Nohas that address the incident at Karbala, or Antigone's insistence on a proper burial, or the songs of Baul minstrels that radically question the form that the "self" takes, the astronomical observations of Louis-Auguste Blanqui on distant stars, Rosa Luxemburg's botanical notebooks, Karl Marx's fairy stories for his daughter Eleanor, the aphorisms in twilight language of Kabir, the weaver of Benares, and the riddles of Bodhidharma or Dogen all constitute the most subversive aesthetic inheritances that we lay claim to. These are a fraction of the sources to which we can turn when thinking of detours that puzzle constituted power and its pattern of dominance over culture, economy, traditions, and social norms. Protest is an invitation to polyphony, to the invention of forms in thought, and to multiplying sources for thinking.

MKL/ *You've been working together since 1992, a significant year in Indian mass media with the foundation of Tamil Sun TV and the rise of private cable television, for instance. Can you address how access to media—whether mass-media or art-world distribution—has changed for you over the past quarter century? I am thinking particularly of the possibilities for public access to politicizable media.*

RMC/ We met in a media school, and our formation lay in learning to make documentary films. We worked for a few years as producers for educational and cultural television. We witnessed a few key things: new media technologies, the portable computer, the Internet, cheaper video cameras and sound recording equipment, editing software, and, finally, forms of mobile telephony and other devices that put image- and sound-making possibilities

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in the hands of huge numbers of people. This meant that the specialized role of the “media maker” or “media activist” started becoming redundant. The older mode of image-making, on behalf of others, became less valuable as a stance. By the late '90s, image-making had strongly emerged as a form of thinking.

Today, things have changed even further.

The ubiquity of social media, and their viral integration into our everyday lives, means that the communicative ecology that we live in today is very different from that which was prevalent even fifteen years ago. We no longer

live in a world where artists qua artists need to be “tribunes” of the people, whistleblowers, pedagogues, chroniclers, documenters, eulogists, critics, custodians of identity, heralds of change, conscience keepers, lightning rods for popular sentiments, and a means to execute propaganda either in conformity with or in rebellion against the status quo. The making of signs, memes, slogans, metaphors, and the symbolic coding of the vitality of protests—say, encoded in a hashtag—is not only the preserve of artists, performers, and writers, or even of political activists. Leaks and hacks, which have their own *techné* and aesthetic, are likewise no longer the sole preserves of hackers. These skills are learned on a mass scale because they are an integral feature of the way in which symbolic and affective information

is processed now. Smartphones are portable studios, workshops, playrooms, stages, agoras, and toolkits of billions of people.

MKL/ *Could you address the way you conceive of the nature of collective work, which your very name evokes: that is, how do you think of collectivity as both an organizational imperative—social, political—and as a creative imperative as well? I’m thinking in particular of media projects that you have done in the past with local communities, such as Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence or The Great Bare Mat App, for instance.*

RMC/ *Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence* and the related work *If the World is a Fair Place, Then* (both 2015) emerge from an intersection of responses



Figure 2. *Raqs Media Collective, Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence (2015). Image courtesy of the artists.*

to a question asked by us, “If the world is a fair place, then. . . ?” to the inhabitants of St. Louis, on invitation from the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis. This was taking into consideration the historical legacy of the St. Louis World’s Fair, and the city’s long history of class and racial rumblings. We posed this question in January 2014, and responses came in over a period of a year, during the course of the police shootings and unrest in Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis. Through the responses—which included, for instance, “I’m listening,” “then less would be more,” “color then will be free,” “then I will find my lost Ferris Wheel,”—the work developed an ambidextrous nature. One arm of the work became metal rings

with the text responses cut out to embrace the tall, proud trees in the sculpture park. The second arm, which grew to become *Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence*, consisted of print renditions of the texts of the responses against open pages of books in our library in Delhi. Our “reading” practices in Raqs are also our way of eavesdropping and whispering, of note-taking and re-reading, or parsing a collective intelligence that touches us, and to which we contribute.

The other work that you refer to, *The Great Bare Mat App* (2013), was an app we made with Maria Isabel Meirelles (and curator Pieranna



Figure 3.
Raqs Media Collective, Detail, Art in the Age of Collective Intelligence (2015). Image courtesy of the artists.



Figure 4.
Raqs Media Collective, If the World Is a Fair Place, Then (2015). Image courtesy of the artists.

Cavalchini) for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, and which is available for free download from the App Store. We worked

with an information designer to produce an object that can act as a metaphor for a way of thinking about conversation and exchange involving many, over a period of time.

This app weaves together images from the works produced by us for the exhibition, *The Great Bare Mat and Constellation* (2012), with objects from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's historic collection and archive, along with stories, fragments from interviews, texts on and from our works. The App also features video excerpts from a series of conversations with a musician, a curator, artists, a teacher, a philosopher, an architect, a conservator, a neurologist, and more, that we initiated at the museum around the questions: Where does nostalgia take us? What does intelligence do for us? What does accumulation do to us? Why does music move us?

MKL/ Do you think of your work as tactical media, and why or why not?

RMC/ When we co-founded Sarai, a place for interdisciplinary practice and research, within the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in 2000, we were very energized by a vision of what was then considered to be "tactical media." A lot of work in the first few years of Sarai was done in developing and working with tactical media tools across languages. These included a spectrum of mailing lists, free and open source software, and developing a commons premised on the intersection of what was then "new media," technological possibilities, and a politics that foregrounded freedom of expression and making of knowledge commons. This gave rise to many things—software,

styles of journalism, performance practices, narratives, and arguments around the urban, translations, experiments in media forms, event structures, temporary platforms, neighborhood practices, and a provocation for a different knowledge culture that could break through access codes and hierarchical protocols.

This range of work was in collaboration and concert with many others in Sarai, and hundreds who passed through Sarai. As co-founders of Sarai, and as individuals, all three of us in Raqs were implicated in the processes that unfolded at Sarai. In this sense, we have an appreciation of and an engagement with, and are impacted by, many tactical media modalities. But as Raqs, we wouldn't position ourselves as practitioners of tactical media.

MKL/ You've spoken recently about "threshold time." What do you mean by that, and how does it relate to exhaustion, resistance?

RMC/ We see threshold time as a time of crossings, of crossovers. The future is already present within the present. Threshold time is a time of making propositions and enacting them even as they are being articulated. In our performance-installation, "*The Last International*," we said a few things that tried to make sense of this condition:

“. . . Everyone is beginning to get the hang of this.”

And no, this is not about just what happens here, in the industrial hubs of Manesar, Gurgaon, Okhla, and Faridabad. This is the

understanding, the conclusion, that crowds upon crowds have come to elsewhere as well. This is what people are saying, in different ways, in different dialects. . . . Call for the seeding of fruit orchards on factory floors; design of park benches that can comfortably seat twenty people at a time; drawing of blueprints of carriages, forms of transport, and roads or rails; the telling of stories that can delight the child who stands before the door that refuses to let her in.

The site of descent is what it's all about, isn't it?

The rift you choose, chooses your questions, throws them back at you like a submarine eruption. Think before you dive. Take your bearings, mark your depth, choose your rift, and dive. There is no good time to dive; there is no time that is not suitable. Tomorrow is not better than today, the past was not better than the present. The future is as good as your next dive. Now is as good as ever.

MKL/ In what ways does your work involve protesting neocolonialism?? I'm thinking here of *However Incongruous, Coronation Park, and The Necessity of Eternity*, but I'm wondering about the question more generally as well.

RMC/ We are not sure that the term “neocolonialism” describes any specific political-economic condition in the contemporary world. We know that the term is used a lot, but that does not mean that it has descriptive power or accuracy. We understand what “colonialism” means. Our work *Coronation Park* (2015)

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The rift you choose, chooses your questions, throws them back at you like a submarine eruption. Think before you dive.

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quotes Delhi's Coronation Park, which was built in 1877 to proclaim Queen Victoria as Empress of India and, afterward, Edward VII and George V as Emperors. Today, it houses the relics of the Imperial statuary that were once installed along the avenues of British India's capital, New Delhi. A suite of figures—hollow, disfigured, cut up or bent, standing on or beside plinths—invokes the hubris of Coronation Park and makes a point about the ephemerality and hollowness of pomp, circumstance, and power.

The last wave of European settler colonialism and Imperial expansion created epistemic distortions, which privilege the European experience as the acme of human achievement. It is useful to remind ourselves from time to time that other histories and cultures have as much of a claim to the formation of who we are. *The Necessity of Infinity* (2017) can be seen as playing a part in this process. It features an imaginative repositioning of a correspondence that took place in the year 999 CE, between a twenty-eight-year-old Al-Biruni, sitting by the shores of the Aral Sea in Gurganj (in present-day Turkmenistan), and the eighteen-year-old Ibn Sina, 250 miles away in Bukhara (in Uzbekistan today), which inaugurated an exchange that lasted for two years. What were Al-Biruni and



Figure 5.
Raqs Media Collective, Coronation Park (2015). Image courtesy of the artists.

Ibn Sina quarreling about? Their disagreements centered around divergent readings of Aristotle’s understanding of heaven and the stars. “Are there other solar systems among the stars,” Al-Biruni and Ibn Sina asked, “or are we alone in the universe?” They were also inaugurating a non-heliocentric conception of the universe as well as advancing theologically daring propositions about the evolution of life several hundreds of years before either Copernicus, Darwin, or Lamarck appeared on the scene. What this exchange, and our joyful deployment of it, embodies is the acceptance that the impulses of modernity have a far more dispersed and colorful provenance than what the standard intellectual histories of the world tell us. This is a move toward reclaiming how we came to be contemporary, and in a sense a

direct challenge to the hegemony of any one part of the world (in this case, the West) on the terrain of intellectual claims.

MKL/ *Much of your work has to do with examining and activating one’s own cultural conditions in a global discourse. Can you elaborate further on this subject—that is, about responsibilities of cultural practice, as opposed to its consumption? For example, what do you think of biennales and national exhibitions in relation to protest aesthetics? Is the relation dialectical or cannibalistic?*

RMC/ Our practice of curation imagines a gathering of active forces. Let us take the most recent example. In the 11th Shanghai Biennale (2016), we were working with sources that

ranged from an eighth-century navigation chart that plotted stars for travelers on the Silk Road, a Bengali film from the 1970s that looked at the intersection of intellectual doubt and political insurgency, and contemporary Chinese science fiction that asks the difficult question of whether the human needs to be saved. This triangulation created a specific geometry of the relationship between a distant—yet not so distant—city, our own creative and intellectual journeys and questions, and the conditions of the planet.

Settled certainties about the distribution of thought and experience, concept and evidence between places and people, need to be disturbed and reworked. In our curatorial practice, we disobey the mode whereby concepts and templates are seen to be emanating from the “West,” and the “experience” that validates these already and historically emanated concepts or templates—data, authentic voice, copies, witness positions—is to be discovered in the Global South.

We would assert that concepts and experiences are coeval and contaminated, and are equally to be found everywhere. The Global South is as generative of concepts as it is of fables. This means not viewing non-European locations as special, but seeing and learning



Figure 6.
Raqs Media Collective, The Necessity of Infinity (2017). Image courtesy of the artists.

to think with them as central to our contemporary condition. Is this protest? We don't know. What we do know is that it is a refusal to accept a constituted division of intellectual and creative labor that we feel has passed its sell-by date.

A biennale, any biennale, any exhibition that is ambitious (if not in actual scale, then in terms of at least the question it is asking) is an occasion for trying out this refusal. It is not an accident that a majority of biennales are taking place outside the metropolitan West. As we said in a symposium on the biennale form recently in Singapore:

In a twelve-month cycle between March 2016 to March 2017 there were numerous biennales—in Sydney, Gwangju, Busan, Singapore, Yinchuan,

Taipei, Shanghai, Yokohama, Kochi, and Sharjah. We observe in these a traffic of complex itineraries, fresh intellectual sources, and inspirations. Along with them, there is an intense mingling of a large number of artists, curators, and artworks and a footfall of millions through these events. Numbers may not matter, and yet we have to acknowledge that there are very large numbers of people visiting biennials. It would appear that something possibly unprecedented is at play here because these biennials all happen to be located in Asia and they welcome the participation of artists from both across and outside the region.

This is honestly also generating a lot of anxiety, which we think we could also partly lay at the door of the good old-fashioned race question, besides a different anxiety of feeling destabilized due to a shifting of terms. It is that whole anxiety of, "It's not in the North, we have never heard of these places, towns, and names and now they have all these biennials. What the hell is going on?" However, it is here that one can find the participation of the greatest number of artists. This is really interesting because these artists are not just from Asia but from Africa, from the greater Middle East, Latin America, and, of course, from Europe and North America. This is the big shift.

If contemporaneity connotes a certain worldliness, then by virtue of the sheer diversity of presences, these biennials are raising the stakes toward what contemporaneity can be, in art and possibly in other things as well. The rest of the world has to catch up. The biennial model being offered from the South is differently played and in a way more bravely played than in the Global North. The shift in emphasis is something that needs consideration in depth. Could it be that the twenty-first-century contours of contemporaneity have a greater breadth and that this in turn lends it a depth, a density, an interconnectedness, and complexity? Could this be a step toward the asking and revisiting of some, frankly, very basic questions?

MKL/ *Many would argue that your work is culturally specific to the physical and conceptual contexts of your country. At the same time also, a large part of your work is necessarily outward facing and globally engaging. Do you think of your work as Indian in relation to the politics it espouses and/or gestures toward?*

RMC/ Every artwork in the world has an anchorage in the material conditions and the specific jumble of histories and currents where it is produced. There are no exceptions to this rule. At the same time, all art addresses both the world it finds itself in, as well as the times to come when that world

may be markedly different. We are anchored in Delhi, a city of more than twenty million people, with many histories. Delhi is a city embedded in the world, it is very much so now, but this was also the case in medieval times. Cities have reality. They grow because people come together over centuries to build them. Countries, in the sense of nation-states, are abstractions. They come into being when lines are drawn on maps, and claims and counterclaims on sovereignty and territory achieve momentary stabilities. The city of Delhi predates what you refer to as our “country”—the Republic of India—and may well outlast it eventually. Since we live in Delhi, our work responds to the world from the city of Delhi, from its dust and its density and its competing destinies. All three of us are children of migrants to Delhi—like most of our fellow citizens of this world city—and we carry in us the histories of many journeys that are not reducible to the histories of nation-states. The questions that our work asks the world embark from Delhi, and return to Delhi, by way of the world.

The politics that striates our work listens to the many currents of our time. It relates to the contemporary global realities of capitalism—which need more room than the horizons that nation-state-based identities allow for. It relates to the complex histories and movements of peoples across the territories that we find ourselves sojourning in and traveling through. It relates to materiality, to sources of energy, and to forms of

life. It relates to dreams and desires that have different temporal rhythms. Our artistic imagination, ambition, and desire are much too specific, too micro, as well as much too inclusive to either fit, or be contained by, the idea of the nation-state.

MKL/ *What for you is the relationship between curatorial work and political practice? Can you discuss your artwork and method of curating, often as a form of decentralized dialogue that forms a vast cross-disciplinary discourse?*

RMC/ One lineage for curation, exhibition-making, museology, and biennale production stems from the history of the “universal expositions” of the nineteenth century. This is the mode that stabilized the confidence of capital and empire through a logic of display and spectacle.

We would insist that this is precisely what needs to be questioned with a mode of practice that claims a different lineage and history.

We would like to smuggle into the narrative of exhibition-making a lineage descended from the “communal luxury” that marked the brief celebratory moment of the Paris Commune of 1871. We learn from Kristin Ross’s engaging historical investigation of the actions proposed and enacted by The Artists’ Federation of the Paris Commune of the idea of “communal luxury”—a combative and festive mode that reappropriates the forces and energies of life, nature, art, beauty, and of everything really, in and for the commons. Ross’s book came out a

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the separation between mental and manual—the thinker and the doer, theory and practice—[. . .] has been breaking down in the recent political ferment of people out in the streets.

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few years ago and it is a valuable starting point to help us think the present, besides the value of looking again at the archive of the Paris Commune.⁴

She is not just reading the history/after-life of the Paris Commune but is looking at the events of 2011, the Occupy Movement, and the politics of the streets of the early twenty-first century. What is compelling is how the separation between mental and manual—the thinker and the doer, theory and practice—is what has been breaking down in the recent political ferment of people out in the streets. The Occupy Movement is one of these examples, but there are many instances of a more porous boundary between theory and practice. This is something that we are deeply engaged in. But what is important about this book is that it is a project where the politics of the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries are being spoken of, together, as contemporaries. For example, we have lost the eight-hour working day and are now having to deal with many of the questions that the nineteenth century dealt with. The politics

of asking emancipatory questions to structures and power is also something that she is cutting across. So, it is not the history of the Paris Commune as much as it is the way of looking at politics and life in itself. This is the whole point of communal luxury—that we can have a shared sensorial and joyous experience for the commons.

There is a lot of research and re-imagination waiting to be done, which could raise the current form of the biennale, and biennale-like structures, toward a mode of action and imagination that is more in tune with the “commons.” We see the “commons” as an emerging value of twenty-first-century life: its signs are visible in all forms of human activity, from science to politics, on city squares, streets, factories, and universities. It is the aspiration and desire of generations to come—and the generation that is coming into its own now—who instinctively know that they can expect a lot more change, charge, and intensity from a plural collective life that is ecological with its algorithms. Their energies, which seem opaque now to older forms of reason and power, can fuel an entirely new conception of

what happens when people come together, pay attention to each other, and when people transmit, receive, and transform. These three have to be spoken in one breath. It is this kind of life force—between generations, between forms of actions, between knowledge systems, and between ways of telling stories—that we are interested in harvesting from curation as a form of practice and thinking.

MKL/ Finally, you recently edited a poetry anthology as a companion to the Bonniers Konsthall exhibition “The Image of War.” Could you explain your thought process behind deciding on poetry as a response to an exhibition on warfare and violence?

RMC/ The anthology *Written By/Read By* was born on a blue carpet in the lobby of a down-market Shanghai hotel, in the days and nights of the opening of the Shanghai Biennale, which said “*Why Not Ask Again.*” A motley collection of artists, curators, writers, filmmakers—none of them professional poets—gathered each night after the day’s events for drink and conversation in the hotel lobby. The management of the hotel was not pleased. These meetings were noisy. There was a lot of poetry being spoken aloud. Some of it was sung. Not all of it was sung well. But none of the listeners seemed to mind. Sometimes a tongue needed translation. Sometimes the sound, or sense of a word, or the shape of the separation between words, leaped across

languages with the same stealth and agility that a deserting soldier displays while making good an escape from armies ranged against each other on the battlefield. It was this experience that suggested the form and content of this book.

Anonymous graffito on a wall in the Syrian city of Homs insists quietly, “When the war gets over, I will get back to my poem.” And so we went back to a few of the companions of the blue carpet, and then invited others.

7 December 2017

Respected visitors, we are ourselves authors of a tragedy, and that the finest and best we know how to make. In fact, our whole polity has been constructed as a dramatization of a noble and perfect life; that is what we hold to be in truth the most real of tragedies. Thus, you are poets, and we are also poets in the same style, rival artists and rival actors, and that in the finest of all dramas, one which indeed can be produced only by a code of true law—or at least that is our faith. So you must not expect that we shall lightheartedly permit you to pitch your booths in our market square with a troupe of actors whose melodious voices will drown our own.

/ **Notes** /

¹ Raqs Media Collective, *The Capital of Accumulation* (2010), video installation, 50:00, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/231>.

² Plato, *The Laws*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 1387.

³ Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, *Sibaji Bandyopadhyay Reader: An Anthology of Essays* (Delhi: Worldview, 2012), 4.

⁴ Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015).

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Founded in Delhi in 1992, Raqs Media Collective (**MONICA NARULA, JEEBESH BAGCHI, and SHUDDHABRATA SENGUPTA**) follows its self-declared imperative of “kinetic contemplation” in order to produce a trajectory that is restless in its forms and methods, yet concise with the infra procedures that it invents. The collective makes contemporary art, edits books,

curates exhibitions, and stages situations. It has collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers, curators, and theater directors, and has made films. In 2001, it co-founded Sarai—the interdisciplinary and incubatory space at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi—where it initiated processes that have left a deep impact on contemporary culture in India.

Exhibitions curated by Raqs include *The Rest of Now* (Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008), *Sarai Reader 09* (Gurugram, 2012–2013), *INSERT2014* (New Delhi, 2014), and *Why Not Ask Again* (Shanghai Biennale, 2016–2017). Its work has been exhibited at *Documenta*, and the *Venice, Sao Paulo, Manifesta, Istanbul, Shanghai, Sydney, and Taipei Biennales*. The prospective, *With an Untimely Calendar*, was held at the *National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi*, in 2014–2015. Other solo shows have been on exhibit at the *Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Boston, 2012), *CA2M* (Madrid, 2014), *MUAC* (Mexico City, 2015), *Tate Exchange* (London, 2016), *Fundación Proa* (Buenos Aires, 2015), *Laumeier Sculpture Park* (St Louis, 2016), and the *Whitworth Art Gallery* (Manchester, 2017).