

A Letter to Amália
Jyran, Who Will be
Fifty Four in 2061 CE

Raqs Media Collective

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Dearest Amália Jyran,

In fifty years time, in 2061, a time capsule buried into the grounds of the _____ of the city of Moss in the Østfold county of Norway, will be opened, and our insertions into the handsome aluminium box that came parcelled to us only the other day from the Momentum exhibition at the Nordic Biennale of 2011 will be made public.

You - Amália - who likes rabbits and ribbons so much today will then be a mature woman, at the peak of her powers, fifty-four and a bit years old. You will be a woman we would very much like to get to know better, if we are still lucky to be around.

Regardless of our presence or absence on that day, we would like it if you were present when the time capsule is dug out of the earth. Take good care, so that in the summer of 2061 you can set aside a few days to make this trip to Norway to indulge our memory and our collective's modest vanity. Don't say no. We are, after all, asking for this appointment well in advance, and we know that your calendar for the year 2061 is empty, as of now. Nowadays, your days presently busy with play-dates and kindergarten will grow crowded as the years pass. We know that we must carefully reserve our claim on your time.

After all, what is time? The physicist John Archibald Wheeler, the same person who gave us what you will no doubt come to think of as the quaint twentieth century term 'black hole' is reported to have said that "*time is the name we give to the thing that prevents everything from happening all at once*". By writing and reserving so long in advance, we are trading a little bit of our today for a little bit of your tomorrow.

Frankly, by then, we (your mother Monica, Jeebesh and Shuddha, some of

your earliest playmates and oldest friends, the three people who make up Raqs) will have probably left you to your devices. Our long dance with each other straddling the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries will have ended. Hopefully, we will be nourishing the root of some trees somewhere, happily contributing to the cycle of life. Or else, if any of us remains, we will be infirm. We will be quiet hostages to medication and memory, happy to see you and hear from you whenever you have the time.

Some of the things we did before you were born and while you grew up will perhaps still be flickering on a few screens, perhaps in a few museums. Some objects that were born of our arguments will be in need of repair. Some pictures will have faded. Some files will be lost forever in crashed hard drives. Some links to our memories will still be whirling about, doing their own raqs, their kinetic contemplation, on the internet. (Will you still call it the internet?). We will have been rejected, recovered, retrieved, remembered, misremembered and forgotten, all by a very small number of people in comparison to the numbers of all those who will share the planet with you. And the box interred into the earth in our name at Moss will still have guarded its secrets, bided its time. Some of the books that carry our name will begin turning up in the antiquarian bookshops you will frequent. Perhaps you will collect them, perhaps you will not care for them, because you will have so much to do, so much to read and know, so much to live for and with and against. We would not wish it otherwise. This century, this time, - the future - is already more yours than it is ours. We are sharing it with you in the full knowledge that you will taste a lot more of it than we will.

And yet, exactly as we say to you when we share with you a melting ice lolly on a summer afternoon (and what is the future but a melting piece of frozen time skewered on to the stick of the present) we ask you not to be too greedy. Not even you, proud citizen of futurity, can claim time as property.

Reprising what the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus said in his letter to a man called Menoeceus, and partially correcting our willing away the future to you, we could say that, *“we must remember that the future is neither wholly ours nor wholly not ours, so that neither must we count upon it as quite certain to come nor despair of it as quite certain not to come.”*

This means that no matter what we estimate, some of the things we hope for will not come to pass, and some of the things that we fear will occur, even though our hopes themselves may linger and our fears continue to haunt the world. Further, some things that we can neither predict nor imagine will certainly happen, delighting and troubling us all, but no doubt surprising us with their unexpected reality. The things that we enter with the aluminium time capsule will be witnesses to our sense of tomorrow, for even if they do not come laden with predictions and desires, they will bring with them a whiff of the time of their inception. How can that time not be pregnant with its own sense of the future? Whatever we put into the box will tell you something about the things we knew, the days we spent together and the world we imagined for you and ourselves. They mark the things we owe to our time.

In an early Sanskrit commentary on the Vedas called the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (*The Brahmana of the Hundred Paths*) there is an interesting idea about indebtedness. The commentary states that each human being is born entangled into four kinds of debt. A debt to the gods and the cosmic order (to be repaid by sacrificial offerings), to the learned ones of the past, (to be repaid by learning and producing new knowledge), to the ancestors (to be repaid by progeny, by making sure there beings to witness the future just as our ancestors witnessed the past), and to all human beings, who made it possible for us, their guests, to mark our sojourn on earth after being born (to be repaid by hospitality). These four debts mark our relationship to time. We exit the world either with our pledges partially or fully redeemed, or are found wanting. If found wanting, our debts are passed on (with compounded interest) to future generations and to future births.

The things we do – including spending hours thinking about how to fill an empty aluminium box so that you can be pleased to open it fifty years from now – are all done in partial fulfilment of the debts that we were born with. They represent a sacrifice of our time and a harvest of our will, a process of learning and reading the world, a link to you, our real and symbolic progeny, and our effort to clear a little space that can be hospitable to a thoughtful sojourner. All art is a repayment of the debt that we owe to life. Partly to the

past, in part to our present, and indefinitely to our future.

You have every right to ask, when you open the box, whether or not we will have redeemed this pledge. But when you weigh the value of our offering, please be generous in your estimation. The quality of our experience was formed to a great extent in the impoverished workshop of the twentieth century, for that is the time, that time of cant and terror, in which we grew out of our childhood. We grew up injured by the cynicism that prevailed around us, and intoxicated by the escapes that utopia held out. The time you were born into was marked by less cynicism, and fewer illusions. We are glad we brought you into the world when we did. It was the right time.

In the time of our formation we ran after machines, danced to slogans and were laid waste by the stupor of nostalgia. We were schooled in haste, tested by scarcity, seduced by irony and thrown into prisons of doubt. And yet, we got by. We fought and learnt to be friends in the fighting. We learnt to think with images and to picture thought.

We came to know that men and women are more curious, more diverse, more amusing and more irritating than we imagined. We found each other, and argued with all our hopes, our fears, with every conjecture that either one of us had picked up from the streets of our times and dusted off to hold to the cold light of our collective gaze. This is how we learnt to see the world.

Today, on the day when the newspaper speaks of a mad dictator's last stand in Libya, of radiation leaks in Japan and Wikileaks in India, of a world poisoned and entertained in equal measure, the things we know and remember will shape the things we apprehend of your future. Everything we do today will water the seeds of all that we have learnt to hope, fear and expect of all that is forthcoming. This is what goes into the box that you will open. These are the things built on the foundations of our memories and experiences. These are the shadows of our expectations.

Perhaps, after orgies of meaningless violence, and the abbreviated ascent and decline of new powers in the century that will be more yours than ours, nations will no longer make war, and even cease to be nations. Perhaps the

long night of Capital will at last slouch towards the quiet dawn of a new social formation. Perhaps in that early hour, when it comes, it will also become difficult to distinguish between hospitals, guesthouses and prisons, between lasting peace and an incredible sadness. Perhaps, after decades of turbulent weather, we will finally learn to be kinder to the earth, and become more restrained in our greed. Perhaps we will replace fossil fuels with the energy drawn from the moisture of dewdrops and the salt in our tears. Perhaps we will eat better, learn more, fly less but travel more. Perhaps we will live more equal lives but come to fear our own thoughts and become even more unforgiving of our memories. Perhaps you will be more gregarious and solitary at the same time. Perhaps we will have found a cure for AIDS and cancer. Perhaps there will be the accidental discovery of paradoxically benign viruses that will need to be propagated by promiscuity. Perhaps we will realize that we are not the only claimants to self-conscious sentience on this planet, and perhaps that discovery will be more startling than the hoped for (or feared) encounter with life from outer space. Perhaps, if and when, our species does finally embark on long voyages into outer space, the sense of adventure will also be accompanied by the good sense to not colonize the planets we touch down upon.

Perhaps when you are fifty-four you will learn new languages overnight, smell music and wear sculpture, fabricate and distribute complex three dimensional objects with whatever it is that takes the place of computers and the internet. Perhaps the software pirates of your days will be the ones who create abundance by freely sharing the knowledge necessary to make things, not only code, music and movies, but also food, medicine, clothes and shelter, giving each according to their necessity and taking from each according to their capacity, finally bringing the spectre of communism closer to life. Perhaps ordinary men and women will be extraordinarily beautiful. Perhaps there will be a lot less murder and a lot more suicide. Perhaps your generation will test new desires, taste new disappointments.

Perhaps it will all not be so different from today.

In time, you will come to understand the pleasures and pains of dealing with the uncertainty of the future. Right now, much of your disappointments

consist in the fact that things don't always turn out the way you want them to when you want them to, like the fact that bedtime is always too early or that there is a 'no more' standing quietly next to the second sweetie in your mother's hand. As you grow older, you will understand that the thing we keep doing is to adjust 'what' we want to 'when' we can get it. Sometimes, that 'when' never comes, and sometimes we realize that we wanted something only when we got to it, or much after it has come to us, or even when it just passed us by.

The thing that helps us adjust our desires to the possibility of us realizing them is what we call imagination. We can always comfort ourselves with the things that we imagine we have, even when we don't possess them. In fact, imagination helps us not to be obsessed with having things all the time. And so, when we tell you stories in which you are travelling in the forest and making friends with tigers, or in which you are swimming in an ocean of apple juice, or imagining a box of buried treasure waiting for you in a far away country, what we are asking you to do, little by little, is to exercise a robust imagination.

We fill the empty boxes of objects, situations and processes with the meaning we find or make in our imaginations. And so, we will fill the time box that perhaps you will help unearth and open with the things that meet at the crossroads of our imaginations. What will those things be? We leave you to imagine them.

In our world, we are plagued by an excess of desire and a scarcity of imagination. We want more from everything and yet are unable to imagine our plenitude. Human evolution was spurred to move along an axis of adapting bodily circumstances to the realities of the environment. But as we ascend the spiral that twists into the future we realize that the environment around us is increasingly of our own making. We are maladjusted to the world that we have created to fulfill our wants. It makes us sick, breathless, sleepless and tired, and it leaves us feeling cheated. The only means our species has to cope with its betrayal of itself lie in the consolations of ideas and images. In fashioning, with those ideas and images a self that can imagine a satisfaction that need not arise from meeting the demands of greed. This is

the imagined self that delights in things that are as yet unknown, that have no name, that cannot be stolen, or divided by being shared.

Once, a long time ago in Africa, we stood on our feet and became Homo Sapiens Sapiens, the ape that understood. Now, we sit at our desks and are imprisoned by all that we understand. We have become the ape that sat down to understand and did not get up again. For things to get better again for you, your generation will need to stand again, make memory and imagination work to produce new thoughts, new concepts, new ways of being human. We will have to find a way to leaven a portion of understanding with a great deal of imagination, and a fair amount of poetry.

Homer, the poet who began his *Odyssey* by asking the muse to “sing of the man of twists and turns”. The ape that sings, that twists and turns, is Homo Homerus. We hope that you, Amália, will be one of the mitochondrial Eves of that species. We pass on our debt to the future to you, because it will be women like you who will weave the future for all tomorrows to come. Amália, when the children who will dance between the stars look back on the earth and remember you as their ancestor, the three of us will have become fossil fuels, waiting to be ignited in a world that will no longer depend on us. We will be spent then, and our debts will finally be cleared.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine of Hippo tells us that *“Perhaps it might be rightly said that there are three times: a time present of things past: a time present of things present: and a time present of things future. For these three things do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.”*

There are three of us and only one thing we can call ‘now’ between ourselves. That ‘now’ is the time in which we fill and seal the time-capsule in your four year old presence, on the blue floor of our studio. Imagine that one of us fetches memory, the other experience, and the third, expectation from what St. Augustine would call the well of our conjoint soul - the intersection of our imaginations. We will create combinations of these three things to make a compound of the times present of things past, the times present of things

present and the times present of things future. We will give your a handful of our memories, a dash of our experiences, and steal from the future a dram of our expectations, and then we will shut the lid and seal the parcel. This is our present to you. A box of our time.

with all our love and hope,

Monica, Jeebesh and Shuddha
(Raqs Media Collective)

New Delhi, 22nd March, 2011 CE