

ART AS A PLACE

by The Raqs Media
Collective

with Kaushik Bhowmik

visible

*where art leaves its own field and becomes
visible as part of something else*

Foreword

The Raqs Media Collective are here in dialogue with Kaushik Bhowmik, an historian that shares with them some thoughts about imagining art as a place. Thanks to the exhibition *Sarai Reader 09*, curated by the collective, this conversation became public and involved almost 60 artists, and non artists, that submitted a proposal through an open call. A proposal to think about what constitutes the artistic practice, to think of art as a place that becomes a different place every time. The title of the show makes reference to the Sarai Reader book series, which has been, over the years, widely recognized as a site of critical and creative thinking.

As Bhowmik reminds us “the contradiction between unprecedented material creativity amongst populations and the regime of productivity that feeds off it are beginning to reach epic proportions”. Preoccupied on how to give new meanings to the place that art can inhabit and make meaningful to the other fields of life, the Raqs Media Collective share through this workbook the process of an exhibition full of encounters, events, talks, writing, situations, objects, materials, and all the conversations that filled the gaps between these actions. Within this workbook an ensemble of emerging names is interspersed with visual documentation of what happened, while the voices of the participating artists attempt to think about art as a place.

Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander

WORK 10AM-5PM OVER A WEEK,
 IN THE SPACE • CALL PEOPLE FOR
 LUNCH DISCUSSIONS IF YOU WANT •
 DEVELOP A CRITICAL LEXICON AND
 VOCABULARY FOR CONTEMPORARY
 ART • INVOLVE MORE PEOPLE • WORK
 BY YOURSELF • WORK TOGETHER
 WITH OTHERS • INVITE • PERFORM •
 INITIATE • CREATE PUNCTUATIONS
 • PAIR • MAKE A SET • PRODUCE A
 WORK • NO SPECIFIC WORK NEED BE
 MADE • STAGE • TRANSFORM SPACE •
 GIVE FORM TO AN IDEA • QUESTION
 • EXPLORE • RESPOND • INVESTIGATE
 • INVENT • PROPOSE AN OPEN
 STUDIO • EXTEND ART WRITING •
 CREATE A PROCESS PRACTICE • RELAY
 PROCESSES • IMAGINE AN EXTENDED
 NETWORK PRACTICE • PRODUCE
 REPETITION WORKS • SHAPE
 INSTRUCTION WORKS • CONCEIVE
 A SOAP OPERA • OCCASION A CRIME
 STORY • CONDUCT AN AUDITION •
 PUT TOGETHER A PHOTOGRAPHIC
 BILLBOARD • REALISE A SLIDESHOW
 • COMPOSE A *MIS-EN-SCENE* •
 FORMULATE A BROADSHEET

Sarai Reader 09: The exhibition is curated by Raqs Media Collective and is a collaboration between Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, and Sarai-CSDS, Delhi.

Sarai Reader 09, running from 18 August 2012 to 16 April 2013, is an exhibition asking for the sensation of thought and its relation to artistic practice to be explored. Through proposals, ideas, processes, speculations, experiments, trials and enquiries, over 100 artists/non-artists are engaging with possibilities of artistic life.



Cybermohalla Hub by Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller with Cybermohalla Ensemble

Proposal room and first floor exhibition space



Kaushik Bhowmik, ***historian***

This place moves into our histories from the wilderness and the desert...or even from aboard ships that ply no more. I am speaking of viharas and monasteries and Foucault's heterotopic ship where people do things away from the central logics of imperial history. One speaks about places such as the Sufi khanqah. Away from the polis, away from the granaries of Mesopotamia, where too, people gathered to do things but with objectives of building property and empires of control. One speaks maybe even of a village where much else is produced in distracted reverie of movements to come, what gets sold in the marketplace as tribal art or craft. Where the florid effervescence of life finds irrational yet aesthetically enchanting forms in leisure and ease. Something that has a parallel history even in the history of modern art parallel to the career of the bourgeois salon. Ruskin's Workingmen's College or Cooper Union as places where people came to exercise their skills and crafts. A place for those at variance from the logics of the factory and the marketplace as defined by their political economies to come to and practise a vision of the world in the reality of labour and history. The practitioners in such locales need not have been 'artists' as we understand the term today, not people professionally committed to a career in art. They consisted of all kinds of people – artists-to-be, journeymen, amateur dabblers in clay and paint and so on. Modernity promised the sublimation of creation in wilderness of other times in a sublimely connected humanity.

Artists

Akshay Rathore and Flora Boillot, Moritz Fingerhut, Astha Butail, Harkat/Inder Salim, Lawrence Liang, Portside, Asim Waqif, Raakesh MPS, Julien Segard, Ashhar Farooqui and 9 Circuits, Rupali Gupte, Prasad Shetty, Prasad Khanolkar, Suraj Rai, S. Ananth, Solomon Benjamin, Vijai Patchineelam, Anurag Sharma and Anush Singh, Silke Kästner, Anita Dube, Cybermohalla Ensemble, Ishita Tiwary, Paribartana Mohanty, Belinder Dhanoa, Mitali Shah, Parismita Singh, Ramesh Pithiya, Bhagwati Prasad, Kumar Ranjan, Aradhna Seth, WALA and Kush Badhwar, Gagandeep Singh, Mihaela Brebenel, Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, Subodh Kerkar and Katharina Kakar, Tapio Makela, Ish S, Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, Zuleikha Chaudhari, Sayantan Maitra 'Boka', Parul Gupta, Rabindra Patra, Namrata Singh Pandit and Uday Pandit, Payal Wadhwa and Niranjani Iyer, Rehaan Engineer, Rudra Rakshit Sharan, Amitesh Grover, Mario Santamaria, Ranjeeta, Anvita Jain, Alexander Hahn, Umang Bhattacharya, Parvez Imam, Jenson Anto, Malini Kochupalli and Julia Gutge, S. Vijayaraghavan, Saba Hasan, Inheritance Projects, Ayesha Hameed, Rashmi Kaleka, Meera Menezes, Koustav Nag, Elske Rosenfeld, Aarti Sunder, Amarendra Nandi, Soumitrimayee Paital, Suresh Kumar G, Pramod Kumar, Mohanakrishnan Haridasan, Yashaswini BR, Pinak Banik, Lipika Singh Darai, Pallavi Paul, Naveen Mahantesh, Sadre Alam, Aakash Ghar, Aastha Chauhan, Aisha Abid, Boo Chapple and Sanaz Mazinani, Charlotte Cordonne, Ally Bishop and Chloe Hughes, David Szanton and Peter Zirnig, Debasis Barui, Dhara Mehrotra, Danial Lichtman and Julia Marchand, Sadia Shirazi and Alexis Bhagat, Irmelin Joelson, Mehreen Murtaza, Isabela Grosseova and Jesper James Alvaer, Elena Gilbert and Joseph Martinez-Redwood, Nilanjana Nandy, Sanjay Sundaram, P Bujinga Rao, Preeti Singh, Hemavathy Guha, Manmeet Devgun, Jose Abad Lorente and Samudra Kajal Saikia, Rohini Devasher, Siobhan Feehan, Suraj Kumar Kashi, Tanya Goel, Tishyaray Chaudhuri, The Videopoetry Collective, Sin Kabeza Productions, Suchismita Ukil, Isabel Seliger, Prayas Abhinav, Pratik Sagar, Alex Monteith, Danny Butt, Jon Bywater and Natalie Robertson, Vaibhav Raj Shah, Vaibhav Sharma, Surajit Biswas, Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi, Isaac Contrera, Sarah Burger, Mansha Chhatwal, Layout 3, Nancy Goldring, Julie Skarland and Eryck Abecassis

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(above) *Why Ask the Old Questions* by Parismita Singh, 18 August to 13 October 2012, being erased by the artist during *Episode One*, 13 October 2012; (below) foreground: Architectural insertion by Zuleikha Chaudhari, background: *P.T.O.*, presented by Shveta Sarada, 18 August 2012



One speaks of the place of non-art in the history of art just as the French philosopher François Laruelle speaks of the role of non-philosophy in the history of philosophy. One is now wondering of the bohemian contexts of 'sketches' of perceptual life, kitsch, amateur art etc. in the fringes of modernity that nevertheless were foundational to the advent of modernist art. St John's Wood, Chelsea Village, Bandra-Versova and so on. Art was for long and could acknowledge itself as a rhizomatic activity coursing through a myriad of creative personalities – the artistic host, the muse, the model, the actress, the Sunday painter, the amateur sculptor or potter and so on. The 'scene' consisted of few artists and many many outliers of the majestic adventure of modern art. Today, unfortunately, we have a 'scene' defined only by artists/artists-to-be and a few others who are either economically – or media – worthy. There is too much art and very little else in the art scene today. One does not lament the demise of communities (for art communities exist today as well) but a certain connect the artist had with life. The place of art was one where the ordinary and art grew together through the passage of many kinds of life. There was a time when the art 'scene' could enrich and ennoble many kinds of lives other than the famously artistic one. One also frowns at art's self-willed sundering its relationship with that rather vague domain of experience and life – wisdom. Wisdom as a rule belongs to the terrain of emptiness, a space away from the logic of self-interest, in other lives or experiences. An art scene where everyone wants to be an artist in a professional competitive sense has very little occasion for such situations.

Art as a Place



Foreground: Parul Gupta making her work in the proposal room; background: Rabindra Patra discussing his work with visitors, 10 November 2012

Paribartana Mohanty conducting auditions as part of his work, *Act the Victim*, 17 November 2012



Umang Bhattacharya recording conversations with other artists and visitors as part of his work (*Untitled*), 17 November 2012

The erosion of leisure time or rather the conversion of leisure into productive activity is of course the principal reason why this has happened. It is the productivity of leisure-time activities that professionalizes art in a certain way. And it is this same loss of leisure to productivity that impoverishes ordinary life giving it unitary definitions – the place for many people doing many things in their lives and coming together to show off their wares to one another in easygoing ways is gone. As we know places (in the anthropological sense of the term) are disappearing into space, or are giving way to fantastic places of the imagination that are increasingly difficult to externalize, share materially or tangibly. What is really endangered by such a retreat of creation into the imaginary is the space occupied by the human body. Frustrated by the lack of time to get out of continuous productivity the mind demands that the individual destroy the very space of self-presence. Lacking place, the mind threatens to destroy space itself. The contradiction between unprecedented material creativity amongst populations and the regime of productivity that feeds off it are beginning to reach epic proportions.

The irony is that much of what passes for productive creative labour today is branded by the idea of communication. But the sense of communication that marks the production of things today in the era of relentless self-advertisement is that of the *Übermensch* searching for his or her flock to preach to. In some ways the difference between the realms of art and the commercialized sectors of creative work that have grown so powerful after a century of feeding off art (much as art has grown through dialogue with all sectors of

Paribartana Mohanty conducting auditions as part of his work, *Act the Victim*, 17 November 2012



Art as a Place... in which things take shape. I'm thinking about HG Master's recent article where he proposes that we reassess, in this case caricature-like, absurdist, painting, not as a window onto something, but rather a theatre of sorts.

Jyoti Dhar, Art Critic

There is that essay by Perec about a room that is useless: "I have several times tried to think of an apartment in which there would be a useless room, absolutely and intentionally useless. It wouldn't be a junkroom, it wouldn't be an extra bedroom, or a corridor, or a cubby-hole, or a corner. It would be a functionless space. It would serve for nothing, relate to nothing." A space without a function. Not "without any precise function"; nor pluri-functional, but a-functional. It wouldn't obviously be a space intended solely to 'release' the others (lumber-room, cupboard, hanging space, storage space, etc.) but a space that would serve no purpose at all.

Vijai Patchineelam, Artist



Visitors read artist proposals during the opening of *Sarai Reader 09: The exhibition*, 18 August 2012

Place also entices one with possibilities to create with its abundance. An abundance reflected through physicality of the place. At the same time, this can be an entrapment with the whole fixation going towards exploiting this abundance. The abundance of an art place can supersede the creative process which needs constant guarding/reflection.

Anurag Sharma, Photographer

Inhabiting an animal forest amongst the structured layout cleared the air for a dialogue. I could walk freely, replicating the circles drawn earlier. This was only when the earlier cutout forms from the past refused to find any grounds in this new place. This time the struggle was between memory and the present moment. The net structure supported the animal forest, and I began a relation with the sensation of touch.

Gagandeep Singh

creative work) is precisely this – the retention at all costs against the onslaught of the demand to become *Übermensch*, the preacher seeking the sect, of a place to create in duration, repose and communion with the world and life. Art becomes the last bastion of the struggle for meaningful leisure as opposed to the leisure imposed by regimes of productivity. But to do this the place of art will have to let in the critical category of non-art, life itself, to seep into the spaces of artistic work. The point will not be to deny the frenetic pace of history but to live amidst it, enjoy its hectic ways, and visit the place of art to discuss life and experience in humane and easygoing ways. For that, artists will have to rediscover the place of non-art in their lives against the relentless call to professionalize in strict ways and join in the factory-line (itself a conversion of agrarian harvesting lines) of productivity. Flights from empire into the wilderness to find the place of art needs to be sublimated in life itself...yet one more time.

We recently concluded a studio workshop in R.V School of Architecture, Bangalore and the theme was “place-making”. A ‘place’ is for collective consumption, its intent is for the collective, within which an individual might almost always find an interpretation. There are other notions of time, residue, overlays and decay that add content to the ‘place’ and become part of the place-making process. These notions gave rise to the idea of ‘context’ being able to define a larger framework for a ‘place’ as opposed to a ‘site’/‘space’.

This was a very specific exercise, in architecture which tried to address the ideas of place making. There were many filters through which the idea of a place could be explored and we explored it by “the death of the author”. One, the immediate destruction of the notion of what the plan stood for, and two, the design process focussed on multiplicity and temporal nature of the spaces designed. I haven’t been to the Devi for the ongoing exhibition yet, but it will be interesting to look at an art gallery exhibition, minus its authors. Will it then read as a ‘place’?

Naveen Mahatesh, Architect

A visitor looks through *P.T.O.*, and in the foreground, a convex mirror as an intervention in the space, 18 August 2012





Visitors participate in the polling booth set up by Bhagwati Prasad as part of his work, *Of the People, For the People, By the People*

Lawrence Liang presents *Shadow Libraries*



Art as a Place

The researcher opens a studio. No key need be fetched. It is an action over a place. Of enclosure and disclosure, encroaching and expansion. The part in participation. The natural light in the repository, the unfinished room, is a supplement.

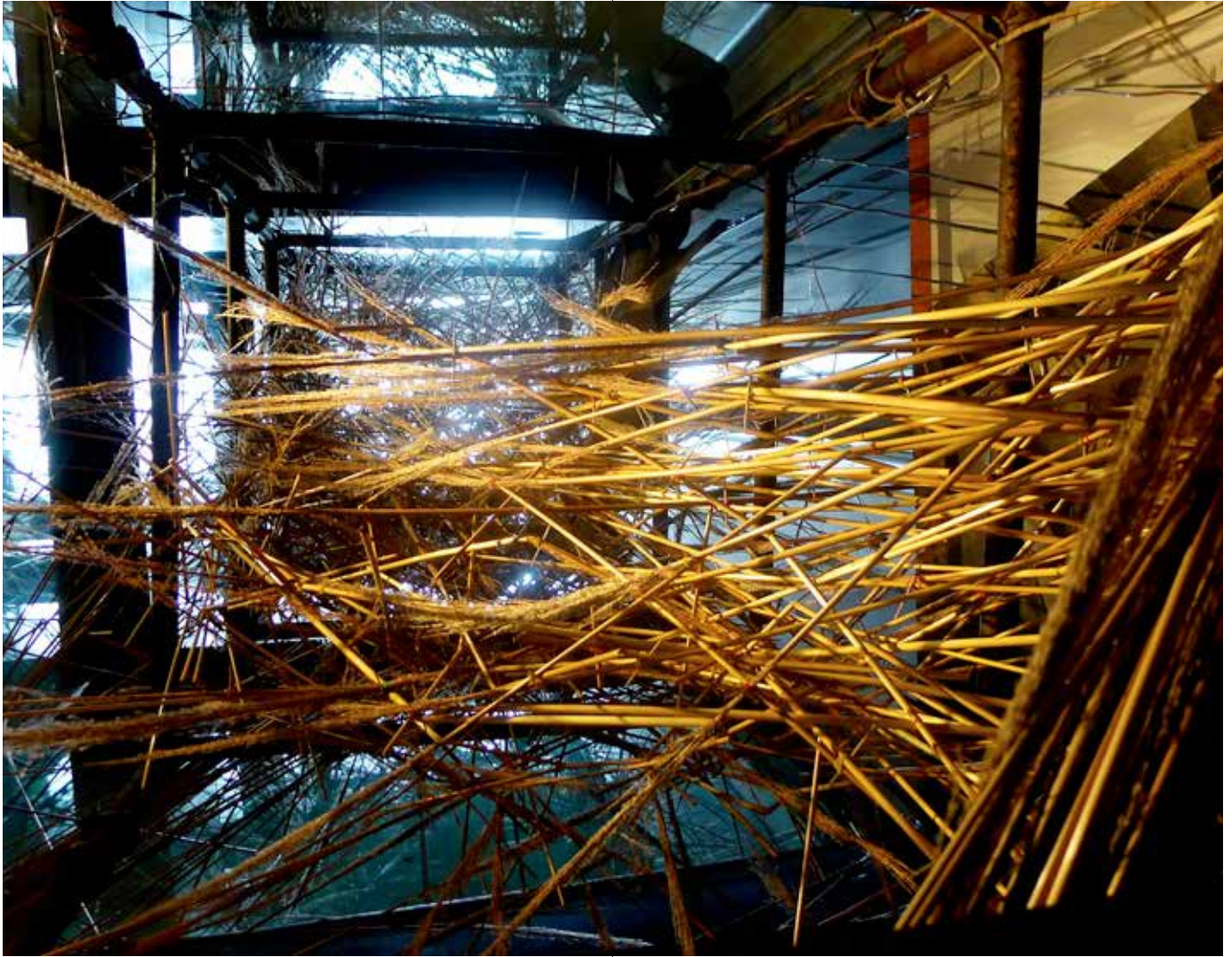
Mihaela Brebenel, Research Scholar

Any lucid understanding of space is perhaps one which engages the 'naming' of the void in the first place. So, if nothingness or zero or shunyata of the beginning is named as Zero or Shuniytya or Nothingness, we obviously get the idea of One which is loaded with things that are made up of Zeros and Ones. And yet, we don't seem to penetrate the finite outline for any locomotion towards infinite.

Inder Salim

Inder Salim performs as part of his work *Harkat School/Un-school of Performance Art*





Work by Asim Waqif, Raakesh MPS, Julien Segard, Ashhar Farooqui and 9 Circuits, 20 August 2012 ongoing



Cybermohalla Ensemble with their *Bureau of Contemporary Jobs* in the Cybermohalla Hub, 25 November 2012

Auditions during Paribartana Mohanty's *Act the Victim*, 17 November 2012 and an extract from Gagndeeep Singh's *Drawing as a Mental Exercise*, 22 November 2012



Artists at Work – Announcements about artist-led events in the exhibition

Kaushik Bhaumik

Deputy Director, *Osian's Cinefan Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema*, New Delhi. An historian by training he is mainly interested in the interface between materiality and imagination in history. He is co-editor of *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader* published by Berg, Oxford, 2008 and has written extensively on the history of Indian and World Cinema. Forthcoming works include a monograph on early Bombay cinema and the co-edited Project Book for the *Cinema/City: Bombay/Mumbai* project. Recently he has started writing about the political economy of contemporary art as well, engaging with the works of artists such as Shilpa Gupta, Raqs Media Collective and Desire Machine Collective amongst others. An art show *The Rise of the BROWNationals*, a collaborative effort with artist Vishal K Dar opened in Bombay in December 2012.

Raqs Media Collective

The Raqs Media Collective enjoys playing a plurality of roles, often appearing as artists, occasionally as curators, sometimes as philosophical *agent provocateurs*. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers and theatre directors and have founded processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India. Raqs (pron. rux) follows its self-declared imperative of 'kinetic contemplation' to produce a trajectory that is restless in terms of the forms and methods that it deploys even as it achieves a consistency of speculative procedures. Raqs Media Collective was founded in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. Raqs remains closely involved with the Sarai program at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (www.sarai.net), an initiative they co-founded in 2000.

This visible workbook is part of a digital publishing series, started in 2012, and made available for free at: www.visibleproject.org/blog

visible workbooks

edited by Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander

visible – when art leaves its own field and becomes visible as part of something else

is a research project in contemporary art that has been undertaken by Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto in collaboration with Fondazione Zegna since 2009



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