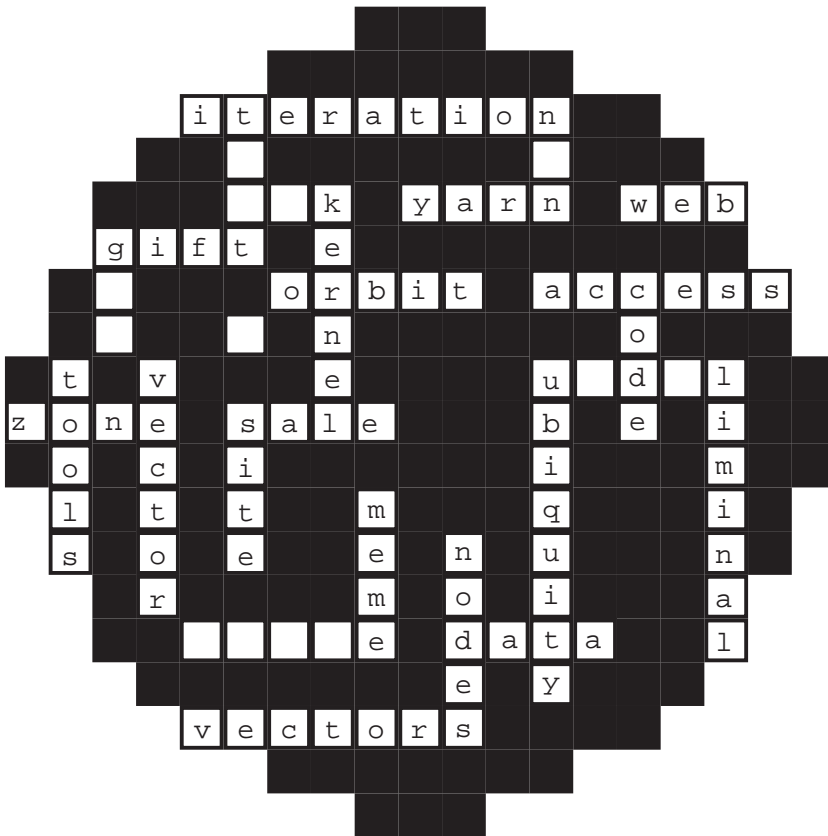


# A Concise Lexicon

## Of / For the Digital Commons

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE



### ACCESS

The facility to log on and log in to a space or a network where people and meanings gather. To be present, to have the ability, the key, to decode a signal, to open doors, to be able to download/upload on to any system of signs and signals – be it the Internet, a book, an art work, or a dinner party. There can be no excess of access.

### BANDWIDTH

Describes the dimensions that are necessary for messages, signals and communications to get through. The greater the *bandwidth* of a system, the higher the number of messages and the higher the quantum of information that it can accommodate at any given time. It follows from this that *access* is a function of *bandwidth*. More people can make themselves heard when there is room for them to speak and be spoken to. *Bandwidth* translates into content-rich information, streams of video, audio and text flowing into each other. It also translates at the moment into cash. The hard cash and control that comes from selling pictures and sounds and numbers to more and more people.

### CODE

That which carries embedded within it a sign. A *code* is always a way of saying something to mean something other than that which is merely said. A *code* can be 'opened', in the sense that it can be accessed and entered, as opposed to 'broken'. An open-access culture of communication 'reveals the source' of its *codes*. A closed culture of communication blocks access to its *codes*. 'Free *code*' is *code* which welcomes entry, and is open to change. 'Free *code*' needs to be shared for it to grow. *Code* connotes community, a community of 'encoders, decoders and *code* sharers'. Like eggs, *code* is sometimes best had scrambled.

### DATA

Information: Can mean anything from numbers to images, from white noise to noise to sound. A weather report, a portrait, a shadow in surveillance footage, a salary statement, birth and death statistics, a headcount in a gathering of friends, private e-mail, ultra high frequency signals, sale and purchase transactions and the patterns made by pedestrians as they walk in a city – all of this can be and is *data*. *Data*, like coal, uranium and other minerals vital to the running of the world economy is mined, processed, refined and sold at a high price. Battlefields, early twenty-first-century inter-personal relationships and stock exchanges have been known to be hypersensitive to *data* traffic. *Data* mining is a major emerging industry in Delhi. The miners lead very quiet days, and spend long nights coding in low temperature zones called "Data Outsourcing Centres".

Contrarily, the word *Data* (*dātā*) in Hindi/Sanskrit is taken to mean 'giver', which suggests that one must always be generous with information, and make *gifts* of our *code*, images and ideas. To be stingy with *data* is to violate an instance of the secret and sacred compacts of homophonic words from different cultural/spatial *orbits* (*dātā* in Hindi and 'data' in English) as they meet in the *liminal zone* between languages, in the thicket of the sound of *quotidian* slips of the tongue. Errors in transmission and understanding too carry *gifts* and *data*.

### ENSEMBLE

The conceit or delight in togetherness in an increasingly anomic, fragmented world. Playing or working together to create finished or unfinished works. Chamber musicians, criminals, *code*-hackers and documentarists form *ensembles*. Artists try to. Effective *ensembles* are high *bandwidth* assemblies that build into their own architecture portals for random access

into themselves. They are, when they are at their best, open systems that place a premium on shared information within them. They can at times maintain high levels of secrecy while appearing to be transparent. Here, confidentiality is an index of practices in gestation. Mined *data* is, sometimes, restored to natural states of information entropy in *data* dissembling *ensembles*, which have been found to work best at night in media labs. The Raqs Media Collective is an *ensemble* and everything it does is an *ensemble* of existing or anticipated practices.

### FRACTAL

The self-organising design of repeating, replicating structures, often found in snowflakes, tree branch growth patterns, molecular structures and *free code*. Every part of a *fractal* pattern carries within it the signature or the emboss of the whole. A single *fractal iteration* carries within it the *kernels* of all others of its kind. Every *fractal* is a *rescension* of every other *fractal* that has grown from within it. In the same way a fragment of *free code*, or *free cultural code*, carries within it a myriad possibilities of its own reproduction and dispersal within a shared symbolic or information space. *Fractals* best describe the geometry of the matrices that are formed when *data* is shared instead of being just mined and shipped by a community of *coders*. *Fractals* are the fruit trees of the unconscious designing mind.

### GIFT

Something freely given, and taken, as in *free code*. *Gift* givers and *gift* takers are bound in networks of random or pre-meditated acts of symbolic exchange. The *code* begets the *gift* as the form of its own survival over time. In this way a *gift* is a quiet *meme*. Reciprocity begets reciprocity. The principle of the *gift* demands that the things being given be priceless, in other words so valuable as to be impossible to quantify in terms of the possibilities of abstract generalised exchange. The *gift* must at the same time, be easy to bear and keep, easy to use and there must be no guilt involved in its destruction or dispersal when its use value either changes or demands redistribution in order to be effective. *Gifts* open doors to our own possibilities of generosity. In this way they facilitate *access* to the things we did not even know we had. And, there is such a thing as a free lunch, although it requires the pursuit of a special recipe.

### HETEROGENOUS

That which begins in many places, like the story of a person's life. Diverse, dispersed, distributed, as in the authorship of culture, and in the trajectories of people who come to a *site*. Interpretations and ideas embrace greater freedom only when they encompass *heterogeneity*. In this, they are like most intimacies and some kinds of fruitcake. The richer they are, the more layers they have.

### ITERATION

An articulation, when seen as an event, is an *iteration*. Utterances, whispers, manifestoes, graffiti, stories, rumours and fragments of poetry found in the streets – each of these are

*iterations*. The organised rendition of a stretch of *code* is also an *iteration*. *Iteration* implies a willingness to say something, and access to the means of saying it, and a time in which it can be said. Every *iteration* resonates through *orbiting memes* that are set off on their vectors by the fact of an utterance. An *iteration* is the *kernel* of a *rescension*. It needs to be said, and then said again.

### JOURNAL

A record of the everyday. Annals of matters varied and *quotidian*. *Data* from day to day to day. On reams or scraps of any material that can carry the emboss of time. The material may vary from newsprint to video to sound to binary *code*, or a combination of the same, and the *journal* may transmogrify from being a witness, to a participant in that which is being recorded. The extent and scale of 'participation' depends on the frequency of entries into the *journal*, and the number of correspondents it can muster. The higher the frequency of entries or number of correspondents, the greater is the intensity of the inscription of a time on a *journal*. A densely, thickly inscribed *journal* is one that is usually open access in terms of writing, reading and publishing. Why else would strangers want to write in? An open *journal* expects to be published anywhere at all. An open *journal* actively practices *xenophilly*. When a *journal* becomes more than a gazetteer of a moment it turns into a history. It then begins to make sense of itself as much as it does about a time that it spans. Conversely, every history begins life as a *journal*.

### KERNEL

The core of a work or an idea. The central *rescension*, of a narrative, a *code*, a set of signs or any other structure that invites modification, extrapolation and interpretation, by its very presence. Here, the term core must not be confused with 'origin' or with any other attributions of originality, which mean little within an open access system. It is almost impossible to determine the origins of a *code*, because the deeper we go into the constitutive elements of a *code*, the more it branches out to a series of *nodes* within and outside a given system of signs. It is more meaningful to talk of the 'custody', rather than the 'origin' of any system of signs.

A *kernel* is often the custodian of a line of ideas that represents within itself a momentarily unique configuration. *Kernels* embody materials in states of intense concentration. This is because they have to encapsulate a lot of information, or nourishment, or structure building materials, within very limited dimensions. The density of information within a *kernel* is a key to its own extensibility. The more the thread that is rolled into a tight ball, the more it can be unwound. *Kernels*, by their limitedness and compactness, are portable, not cumbersome. As in the *kernels* of certain fruits, they may be hard to crack, but once they have been opened, they yield delicious and nourishing stuff. *Kernels* lend themselves to easy reproduction, but are fragile and often in need of protection. This protection may also come in the form of an outer layer of interpretation, which states the purposes and nature of the *kernel*, so that it is not prised open to answer every basic query about itself.

### LIMINAL

Interstitial, vestibular and peripheral. Far from the centre, close to the border. A zone both between and without larger structures. *Liminal* spaces and moments are those into which large stable structures leak animated *data* about themselves and the world. Things happen in *liminal zones*. A city carries within it the contradiction of *liminal zones* located in its centre, because inner cities are the city's farthest borderlands. *Liminal* fringes are often the most conducive environments for the culture of *memes*. This is because exiled images, ideas and meanings from several stable structures mingle in the corridors between them. Here, bereft of identities and other certainties, they are free to be promiscuous and reproduce. They infect each other with recombinant strands of thought and image. At the same time, the perspective of *liminality* brings intimacy to bear on an exclusion. Being *liminal* is to be close to, and yet stand outside the *site* of the border of any stable system of signs, where meaning is frayed from being nibbled at on the edges. Nothing can know the centre better than the sideways glance of peripheral vision. *Liminality* may be acquired from prolonged exposure to the still air of airport departure lounges, thick and over-boiled tea at the Inter State Bus Terminus on the ring road in Delhi, or the *subliminal* flicker of a cursor in an e-mail message.

### MEME

The life form of ideas. A bad idea is a dead *meme*. The transience as well as the spread of ideas can be attributed to the fact that they replicate, reproduce and proliferate at high speed. Ideas, in their infectious state, are *memes*. *Memes* may be likened to those images, thoughts and ways of doing or understanding things that attach themselves, like viruses, to events, memories and experiences, often without their host or vehicle being fully aware of the fact that they are providing a location and transport to a *meme*. The ideas that can survive and be fertile on the harshest terrain tend to do so, because they are ready to allow for replicas of themselves, or permit frequent and far-reaching borrowals of their elements in combination with material taken from other *memes*. If sufficient new *memes* enter a system of signs, they can radically alter what is being signified. Cities are both breeding grounds and terminal wards for *memes*. To be a *meme* is a condition that every work with images and sounds could aspire towards, if it wanted to be infectious, and travel. Dispersal and infection are the key to the survival of any idea. A work with images, sounds and texts needs to be portable and vulnerable, not static and immune, in order to be alive. It must be easy to take apart and assemble, it must be easy to translate, but difficult to paraphrase, and easy to *gift*. A dead *meme* is a bad idea.

### NODES

Any structure that is composed of concentrated masses of materials which act as junction points for the branching out of extensible parts of the overall system may be described as nodal. The concentrations or junctions being the *nodes*. A nodal structure is a rhizomic structure, it sets down roots (that branch out laterally) as it travels. Here, *nodes* may also be likened to the intersection points of *fractal* systems, the precise locations where new *fractal iterations* arise out of an existing pattern. A work that is internally composed of *memes* is inherently nodal. Each *meme* is a junction point or a node for the lateral branch-

ing out of the *vector* of an idea. In a work that is made up of interconnected *nodes*, the final structure that emerges is that of a *web* in which every *vector* eventually passes through each *node* at least once on its *orbit* through the structure of the work. In such a structure, it becomes impossible to suppress or kill an idea once it is set in motion, because its *vectors* will make it travel quickly through the *nodes* to other locations within the system, setting off chains of echoes and resonances at each *node* that trace a path back to the *kernel* of the idea

These echoes and resonances are *rescensions*, and each *node* is ultimately a direct *rescension* of at least one other *node* in the system and an indirect *rescension* of each junction within a whole cluster of other *nodes*. *Nodes*, when written, perhaps erroneously, as 'no-des' gives rise to an intriguing hybrid English/Eastern-Hindi neologism, a companion to the old words – *des* and *par-des*. *Des* (in some eastern dialects of Hindi, spoken by many migrants to Delhi) is simply homeland or native place; *par-des* suggests exile and an alien land. 'No-des' is that *site* or *way* of being, in *des* or in *par-des*, where territory and anxieties about belonging, don't go hand in hand. *Nodes* in a digital domain are 'No-des'.

#### ORBIT

A path that describes the continuous movement of anything within a structure. Because the movement within it is continuous, it (an *Orbit*) is also impossible to define in terms of origin or destination. What is possible to determine at any given moment is the *vector* of an *orbit*. A *meme*, when *orbiting* within a structure of signs, is neither travelling away from its origin, nor is it travelling towards a destination.

This is why, in an open access system, which is composed of *memes*, it is meaningless to talk in terms of authors and audiences, rather one can only speak of the *node* where one got on to an idea, and the junction where one got off, perhaps to enter the *vector* of another *orbiting meme*. Sometimes a work of interpretation, like certain comets and other stellar objects, can have an eccentric *orbit*. This means that there is always a likelihood of a cluster of signs and images from afar, brushing past objects on its path, entering the *orbits* of other constellations, when it is least expected to. The sky of meaning is full of shooting stars.

#### PORTABILITY

The feature of a system or work that best describes its ability to move quickly through different spaces and mediums. A sign or a *meme* that can travel well between image, sound and text media is portable. A work, which while it speaks of one *site*, is understood in another location, is portable. A work that describes many locations in the course of its interpretative *orbit* is also portable. A portable work is rich in *memes*, which act as engines for its movements, and is endowed with compact *kernels* that can travel well without danger of being cracked open. Briefcases, languages, postcards, Swiss knives, computers, jests, stories and shoes are portable. *Gifts*, because they change hands, must always be portable. Monuments can never be. The life histories of some (itinerant) individuals and (nomadic) communities make them approximate the condition of *portability*.

### QUOTIDIAN

Common but not commonplace. The memorable nature of the everyday. Memory walking down a street and turning a corner. Memory buzzing in a hard disk. Ubiquitous, the dirt in a *site*, the fog in a *liminal zone*, that which is thickened through repetition.

Milk, computers, onions, computers, pyjamas, computers, carpal tunnel syndrome, computers, accidents, computers, sex, computers, bread, computers, night, computers, class, computers, skin, computers, love, computers, money, computers, headaches, computers, police, computers, buses, computers, bicycle, computers, radio, computers, horoscopes, computers, matrimonials, computers, funerals, computers, biscuits, computers, conversations, computers, silences, computers.

The *quotidian* is that which makes a *journal* turn, over time, into a history, because it induces the search for patterns and meanings in an otherwise tangled mass of time, in *memes iterated* beyond reasonable limits. Routine, yet random, the *quotidian* nature of anything demands fleeting moments of lucid engagement with the real world, which now includes within it the world that is forged every time any fingers do a qwerty dance on a keyboard. The *quotidian* is a measure of all things, rare and commonplace.

### RESCENSION

A re-telling, a word taken to signify the simultaneous existence of different versions of a narrative within oral, and from now onwards, digital cultures. Thus one can speak of a 'southern' or a 'northern' *rescension* of a myth, or of a 'female' or 'male' *rescension* of a story, or the possibility (to begin with) of Delhi/Berlin/Tehran *rescensions* of a digital work. The concept of *rescension* is contraindicative of the notion of hierarchy. A *rescension* cannot be an improvement, nor can it connote a diminishing of value. A *rescension* is that version which does not act as a replacement for any other configuration of its constitutive materials.

The existence of multiple *rescensions* is a guarantor of an idea or a work's *ubiquity*. This ensures that the constellation of narrative, signs and images that a work embodies is present, and waiting for *iteration* at more than one *site* at any given time. *Rescensions* are *portable* and are carried within *orbiting kernels* within a space. *Rescensions* taken together constitute *ensembles* that may form an interconnected *web* of ideas, images and signs.

### SITE

Location, both as in the fact of being somewhere, and also as in the answer to the question of 'where', that 'somewhere' is. Hence, situation. In a system of signs, *site* – understood in the sense of the *kernel* of a situation – is not necessarily a place, although a place is always a *site*. A *site* can be a situation between and through places. A web *site* is an address on the Internet that always implies a relation of desire between hosts and visitors. In other words, it doesn't really mean anything for a place to exist (virtually) if it is left unvisited. In this way, a *site* can be both located as well as *liminal*. Real as well as potential. A system of signs (a work) that carries the markings of a location on a map may be situated in the relation that a map has to the world. It may be situated between the map and the

world. This situation may be a special characteristic of the work's *portability*, in that, although mobile the work always refers to the relation between *sites* that fall on its *orbit*. In this way, marking a *site* as an address calls for the drawing up of relations between a location and the world.

A *site* is a place where the address is. A *site* is a place where the work belongs. A situation between these two locations (where the work is and where it belongs) is a *site* where the work *orbits*. A *site* is also a place where people need to wear hard hats to protect themselves from random falling bodies, travelling in eccentric *orbits*.

### TOOLS

Things that help make things. Ideas, instruments, concepts, ways of doing things, and ways of being or acting together that are conducive to creative work. In the context of an online environment, a community or an *ensemble* of people is as much an instrument as a software application. Conversely, a *tool* emerges when a group of people discover a method that helps them act together to create something. Again, a work that acts as a navigation aid, a browser or interface in a *web* of *memes*, is also a *tool* with which to open and search for other *tools*.

### UBIQUITY

Everywhere-ness. The capacity to be in more than one *site*. The simple fact of *heterogeneous* situation, a feature of the way in which clusters of *memes*, packets of *data*, *orbit* and remain extant in several nodal points within a system. The propensity of a *meme* towards *ubiquity* increases with every *iteration*, for once spoken, it always already exists again and elsewhere.

It begins to exist and be active (even if dormant) in the person spoken to as well as in the speaker. Stories and the *kernels* of ideas travel in this way. A *rescension*, when in *orbit*, crosses the paths of its variants. The *zone* where two *orbits* intersect is usually the *site* of an active transaction and transfer of meanings. Each *rescension* carries into its own trajectory *memes* from its companion. In this way, through the encounters between *rescensions*, ideas spread, travel and tend towards *ubiquity*. That which is everywhere is difficult to censor, that which is everywhere has no lack of allies. To be ubiquitous is to be present and dispersed in 'no-des'. Sometimes, *ubiquity* is the only effective answer to censorship and isolation.

### VECTOR

The direction in which an object moves, factored by the velocity of its movement. An idea spins and speeds at the same time. The intensity of its movement is an attribute of the propensity it has to connect and touch other ideas. This gives rise to its *vector* functions. The *vector* of a *meme* is always towards other *memes*, in other words the tendency of *vectors* of *data* is to be as ubiquitous as possible. This means that an image, *code* or idea must attract others to enter into relationships that ensure its *portability* and rapid transfer through different *sites* and *zones*. The *vectors* of different *memes*, when taken together, form a spinning *web* of *code*.



## WEB

An open fabric woven of strands and knotted at usually regular, but equally possibly irregular, intervals. Intricately structured, accessible and yet endowed with complex networks of coded messages. The world wide web is a *zone* in which a digital constellation of *memes* can find an *orbit*. A *web* of code is used to harvest meanings, just as a *web* of threads is used to harvest fish.

## XENOPHILLY

Friendliness and hospitality towards others, a human quality that best describes the moral economy of an ideal digital domain. The search for connectedness, and the desire to travel along the *vectors* from elsewhere. The meaning of the hyphen that transforms 'no-des' into a positive value.

## YARN

Fabrics, and stories, are made from *yarn*. A *yarn* is a snatch of reality that travels by word of mouth. Or it is shipped along with lots of html cargo. It is said that each fragment of *code* contains rumours and gossip, or *yarns* about the makers of the *code*. *Yarns* collect in basement cyber cafés, in stairwells of cinemas, in call centres and behind the opaque surface of the walls of an apartment whose address is Error 404, which can be anywhere and everywhere at once. In these places, *yarn* collectors stitch different stretches of *code*-fabric to make long bolts of *data*, which are then taken apart by hackers, and distributed into many *orbits*. *Yarns* can adjust the amount of information they bear in relation to the width of *bandwidth*. That is why *yarns* are good *kernels*.

## ZONE

A *site*, within a location, or a work, that demands an attenuated awareness because of the porosity of the lines that demarcate its existence. A *zone* is differentiated from a grid that frames a *site* because its borders are fluid and accessible, or because they witness a lot of traffic. It is difficult to distinguish the centre from the *liminal* periphery of a *zone*. Alertness about where one stands is a prerequisite for entering any *zone*. A *zone* may also be described as the overlap between *orbits* in a work, where *memes* transfer material from one *orbit* to another, where logic likes to fuzz. The *zone* of a work extends to the outer circumference of the *orbit* of its ideas.

*Zones* are places where serendipity might be commonplace, and the commonplace serendipitous. They are best entered and exited at twilight on shunting cars along abandoned railroads that connect different *data* stations. The timing of twilight may vary, depending on one's longitude, but twilight lingers longer in the *zone* of the web.