

June 01 – Sept. 04, 2012:

Rags Media Collective

The Primary Education
of the Autodidact

Audain Gallery

SFU WOODWARD'S

Opening: June 1, 6–9pm

The *Primary Education of the Autodidact* is presented in partnership with the Indian Summer Festival of Arts & Ideas (www.IndianSummerFestival.ca), which runs from July 5–15, 2012, at the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, and with the support of the Vancity Office of Community Engagement in the SFU Woodward's Cultural Unit.

The Audain Gallery will be closed until September but the project will be publicly visible in the outside windows of the gallery on West Hastings Street.

The Audain Gallery serves as a vital aspect of the Visual Arts program at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. The gallery's mission is to advance the aesthetic and discursive production and presentation of contemporary visual art through a responsive program of exhibitions and to support engaged pedagogy.

The gallery encourages conceptual and experimental projects that explore the dialogue between the social and the cultural in contemporary artistic practices.

The *Audain Visual Artists in Residence Program* and student exhibitions are central to the gallery's programming.

The Audain Gallery is curated by Sabine Bitter, working with gallery assistant Brady Cranfield.

Raqs Media Collective

The Primary Education of the Autodidact

The understanding of the university as a stable institutional site of knowledge has shifted dramatically towards a contested platform for the production of different forms of knowledges which are eagerly incorporated by the university. As Tom Holert points out, “translating ‘knowledge’ into a productive force, converting it into a salable good and marketing it as spectacle ... are central elements of the global university’s mission. And it is here that it converges with the imagery and knowledge industries of ‘contemporary art’, whose art fairs, biennales, conference events, and global museum corporations ... aim to establish commercially valuable relations of equivalence between art, knowledge, and affects.”¹

Artistic knowledge production, and artistic research, is based in the Conceptual Art practices of the seventies and has been predominantly framed through European and North-American artists; however, a second generation of artists, who emerged in the nineties, revised and altered this strain of conceptual practices. The New Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective, a collaborative project between Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, has not only developed this practice further, but they have also brought a critical postcolonial discourse into conceptual practices.

The Primary Education of the Autodidact, commissioned by the Audain Gallery, is out of an ongoing series of works by the Raqs Media Collective that explores knowledge, power, utterance, and silence. It directly addresses the notion and problematic of the autodidact, and also attests to the autodidacticism of the collective’s own diverse body of work and working method. As Raqs Media Collective put it: “In the university of the unknown, everyone is an autodidact by default. We alone can teach ourselves the things that no one else can teach us.”²

1. Tom Holert, “Artistic Research: Anatomy of an Ascent”, *Texte zur Kunst* 82 (2001), p.44.

2. Raqs Media Collective in email correspondence with the Audain Gallery.





The Sensible Learner

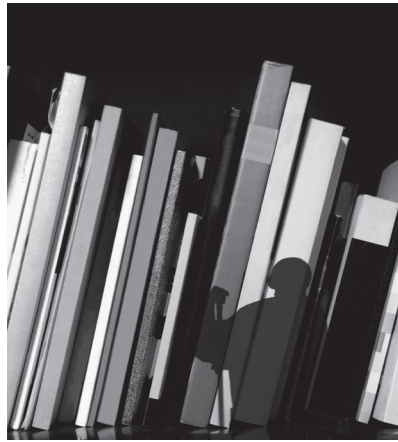
“The autodidact may be at a loss for words, but she has other ideas. Her books are unwritten, but not unread. There are some things that need saying that words can never say. There begins the primary education of the autodidact. No prayers, no petitions, no apologies – just acts that surf potential waves, creating new terms for thinking, knowing, and being the world.”

Raqs Media Collective

The Primary Education of the Autodidact uses the windows of the Audain Gallery as oversized bookshelves, filled with more-or-less orderly stacks of books. A second glance discovers a silhouetted woman “cleaning” the identifying titles and logos off of the books. With this gesture, the woman is washing away older, institutionalized forms of knowledge, passed on as both tradition and standard. As Raqs Media Collective describe her in an email conversation with the Audain Gallery, this woman “is the autodidact transforming knowledge as much as she is transformed by it – thus becoming a site of potential.”

Making space for things not yet known, the woman’s labour is also a process of revealing and discovery in which the given is transformed and renewed, the known recalled as unknown again. As Raqs Media Collective elaborate:

“Like the parts of the periodic table that still lie vacant, there exist entire provinces of knowledge that still



await understanding. These are new zones of thought – built out of erasures, inventions, incisions, glyphs, and overwriting. They call out for decipherment, insisting that the more we know, the more we know what we do not know.”

Challenging the traditional institutions of learning, what seems at stake in the work is what Jacques Rancière has described in terms of an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge.¹ For him, the programmatic explication offered by educational institutions is a kind of regimented “distribution of the sensible.” Rather than ease and encourage learning, such systems, which are as much aesthetic as epistemological, perpetuate stultifying ignorance in a continual deferral of knowledge. Given piecemeal and hierarchized, in other words, knowledge is somehow forever out of reach.

In universities today, institutional forms of pedagogy and established forms of education intersect with

Detail (top left hand corner): *The Primary Education of the Autodidact*

self-directed and individual modes of learning, but often at the loss of critical autonomy for the latter. One could understand this pattern as a struggle between learning and knowing from above and learning and knowing from below. Students are considered to be both active subjects, guided by their own autodidactic creativity, and passive objects receiving their education according to the regime of the institutional production of knowledge. In this struggle, the beleaguered subject/object of knowledge remains unresolved.

Following Rancière, *The Primary Education of the Autodidact* can be read as proposing that it is intelligence that produces knowledge, not the opposite. Unmeasured, the autodidact's education is always primary. Not primary just in the simple sense of preliminary or basic, more as an ongoing emergence, an autopoiesis. But also primary in the sense of foundational: at some point we are all autodidacts. Embodying potential, then, the autodidact is an agent of discovery and change. Working as much across as without the acknowledged institutions and conventions of knowledge, they freely traverse the distribution of the known and not known. Their adventure, and their future, is always underway.

Biography:

Founded in 1992 after graduating together from the Mass Communications Research Centre at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, Raqs Media Collective is a collaborative project by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. Crossing and combining different media, they work as artists, filmmakers, writers, curators, researchers, editors, event organizers, and much more. Inspired by a self-defined notion of “kinetic contemplation”, their practice restlessly explores new forms and methods of production while preserving a consistent rigor.

Their work as artists has been presented in group and solo exhibitions at major institutions internationally, including in London, Frankfurt, New York, Brussels, Hong Kong, and New Delhi, and they have participated in the Venice, Liverpool, Shanghai, and Sao Paulo biennials, in Documenta 11 in Kassel, and in Ars Electronica in Linz.

In addition to many other curatorial projects, they curated “The Rest of Now” and co-curated “Scenarios” for Manifesta7, which was held at various sites in the Trentino – South Tyrol Region of northern Italy in 2008. They are also participants in Manifesta9 as artists, which takes place from June 2 to September 30, 2012, at the former Waterschei mine in Genk, Limburg, Belgium, and they are current Board Members of the Manifesta Foundation.

As well as authoring numerous texts, *Raqs Media Collective: Seepage*, a collection of their writings, was published by Sternberg Press in 2010.

Raqs Media Collective live in and work out of New Delhi, India. They are involved with the Sarai program, a new media initiative they co-founded in 2001 at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, where they are active members of the editorial collective of the Sarai Reader series.

www.raqsmediacollective.net
www.sarai.net

1. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press (2001).

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