

# Wonderful Uncertainty

Raqs Media Collective

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## **Waiting for Rain**

The first rain that ends a long, arid summer in a hot country quickens the heartbeat, unleashes the sudden release of the scent of the waiting earth, makes leaves, bark, tar and metal glow, cleans the light that falls from the sky and transforms children and dogs into heroic shamans and rain-dancers. It is said that even un-romantic people find themselves falling in love more often in the first week of the advancing monsoon.

What the first rain does to our senses, to our bodies, to our dry and waiting minds is the sly undertaking of just a quiet shift, a barely perceptible re-calibration of our appetite for life. The rain invokes something latent, something unformed, something hidden in us, and coaxes us to give those musty, locked-in aspects of ourselves an airing. It awakens sensations just under our skin, makes us remember snatches of forgotten songs and stories, and allows us to see things in the shapes made by clouds. We open windows, unlock doors and let the world in. Our dreams turn vivid.

The best kind of art, like the rain, invokes a re-ordering of the cognitive and sensory fields. It asks of its actual and potential publics to open doors and windows and let other worlds in. This re-ordering – subtle, slight, sure, sharp or soft as the case may be, whether it is a desultory drizzle across a few frazzled or jaded synapses, or the neurological equivalent of an electrical thunderstorm and sudden downpour – is why we bother with art in the first place. When it rains art, we do not reach for umbrellas. It makes sense to let ourselves soak, as long as we can, like children dancing in the season's first rain.

However, unlike the process of paying attention to the environment within and around our bodies (which we cannot avoid as long as we are alive), attending to art is not simply a matter of staying alive but a highly contingent series of choices which remain acts of conscious will even if they are rooted in our somatic instincts. Despite appearances to the contrary, art neither kills us nor keeps us alive, but being in the presence of art is sometimes a matter of fathoming exactly how alive we are prepared to be.

## The Unknown Addressee

This awareness of how alive we can become is a form of embodied, sensate knowledge, which may or may not be expressible in words and readily available concepts alone. It is what people 'know' they experience when they encounter a work, even if they are not always able to say what it is that they know. This knowing 'non-knowledge' may open a few of the windows that have been closed by ordinary knowledge, and so let the rain come in.

This process is not only about what people 'take away' from a work of art, but also about what they 'bring forward' in their experience of it. Different publics bring their own dispositions, which may be as fresh, original and unfamiliar as that which artists and curators purvey. Each may not know the gifts that the other brings to the encounter, and in each case there may be discoveries waiting to be made in the surprises with which the encounter itself is laden.

The issue of not knowing enough about the 'other' cuts both ways. It is not just publics that do not know their artists or what lies hidden in a work of art; artists are equally susceptible to not exhaustively knowing either their own work or sometimes, not even minimally knowing, their public. But the artist's 'non-knowledge' (echoing, but not necessarily identical to, the public's own 'knowing non-knowledge') is not to be confused with ignorance. It is a generative, productive impulse that propels a desire to communicate. It is what brings artists, curators and their public to the same place.

The artist may or may not know everything that lies in their work simply because they are as much an author as a medium for the channelling of different currents and energies (originating elsewhere in time and space and coming to inhabit their practice) of which he or she may as yet be only dimly conscious.

The artist also may or may not know all the things that every person will experience when they encounter his or her work; people bring their own histories, memories, scars and desires to bear on any work that they encounter. An artist cannot possibly know what these may be; in fact, when an artist works, he or she has little or no intimation of how members of the public will get to know themselves when they face the work. The private language of the artist will never be the same as the private language with which the work will be

‘read’ by its viewer. In this sense, the artist is like someone who writes a letter to a lover they do not know they have, in a language that they do not understand, without any guarantee that the letter will either reach its intended addressee or be opened and read, if indeed it ever arrives.

Like Don Quixote asking Sancho Panza to deliver to an unknown address a love letter written to a Dulcinea imagined only through desire, or like the lonesome forest spirit trying to inveigle a passing rain cloud into carrying messages to his distant lover in the opening canto of the classical Sanskrit verse-drama *The Cloud Messenger*, artists often find themselves having to rely on mediators to even begin to become visible to their publics, their distant Dulcineas.

## **The Illiterate Wanderers’ Revenge**

How wonderful it could be if, like Sancho Panza, there were people who could return with replies from audiences, even through the opacity of a correspondence carried on to some extent deliberately at cross-purposes. Like a true and faithful lover, or the earth waiting for rain, the artist would then be susceptible of being transformed by the encounter with his or her public, as much as the public itself might care to be altered by its encounter with his or her work. Then the work itself would become a portal, through which both artist and public passed in search of each other and things other than those contained within the boundaries of their beings and practices.

The point is not to render all things and ourselves transparent and legible, but to insist on the interpretative worth of margins of error, of accidents and serendipity, of uncanny resonances and speculative layering, of doubt and ambiguity as the foundations of an epistemology that does not have to ground itself in the dead habit of certainty.

Nathaniel Katz, who worked as part of the education team on the exhibition *The Rest of Now* (Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008), writes in response to our query about his experience of ‘mediating’ an exhibition:

*I wanted to write again though also to maybe clarify, or expand on an idea that came up during your visit. If you remember while you were giving your guided tour I approached you to say that there are some different attitudes toward mediation at an exhibition, and that a ‘traditional’ guided tour is perhaps not necessary. The way I perceive the situation (and this is by no*

*means definitive or even correct) there is one attitude toward mediation that views the role of the mediator as one who creates the necessary conditions toward the visitor's understanding and engagement with the work. In this attitude the intention of the artist takes supremacy [over] anything else, the purpose of mediation is to arrive at this intention (albeit through perhaps non-frontal means).*

*Another attitude toward mediation is that the artwork is a catalyst toward an engagement that takes place within the group and in conversation with the work. However, the intention of the artist is in many ways secondary, as the meaning that is generated from such an exchange is open-ended. My interest in this work is from the potential that is created by an open ended exchange within the context of art. This is the approach that I have taken in my workshops at the exhibition. For me the artwork, curatorial concept, and workshop structure are a context [...] in which to have an entirely new generative experience. I view art mediation as creative work, not as supplemental work.*

*I guess that I felt it may be important to share this with you as I [have] often felt that the educational programs at large exhibitions were treated as important but not given the same level of importance as say the artists. It created an unfortunate hierarchy, given that those engaged in mediation are those with the most amount of contact (and most impact) with the visitor to the exhibition and with their experience of the exhibition. For me this is a shame, a missed opportunity to really rethink the way we interact with an art exhibition.*

What is significant here is the desire to hold in abeyance the question – or the fact – of the intention of the artist, and hence to re-assert the authority of an exhibition. This frees the work of mediation from being, at best, a supplement to the authorial or curatorial contribution. It makes it possible instead for the mediator to set in motion a series of open-ended interpretative manoeuvres (set up through an exchange in which neither mediator, nor artist, nor curator, nor public have the final word), which seek to take a work of art or an exhibition (and their public) into areas that may not necessarily have been anticipated by its creators or custodians.

This calls for the slow, deliberative prolongation of the interaction between the artwork, its public and its critical milieu, which is not predicated on the instant processing of readily available information alone. What it probably

requires is the belated insertion of the category of discursive and critical wonder (which could be another tangential understanding of the category of knowing non-knowledge that was referred to earlier), as a valid mode of orientating oneself towards a work of art as opposed to the need simply to know. Wonder is not necessarily a retreat into ineffability. Rather, it can, in some ways, be a side step into an eloquent and busy conversation founded on possibilities rather than on certainties.

A 1936 report, produced by a committee set up to examine the condition of museums in India, complained that the foremost museological problem in India was the fact that vast hordes of illiterate people flocked to museums not to 'know' but to 'wonder'. In fact, the colloquial Hindustani term for Museums was *ajab-ghar* or 'house of wonders'. The report concluded that the only way to improve museums and museum-going and the appreciation of art and culture in India was to discourage the illiterate itinerant and make museums places in which to create the appropriately 'aware' modern subjects – the projected future cognoscenti. Since that day, museums in India have become sepulchral. The living breath of disorderly, ill-informed, wondering and wandering visitors, who walked in and out of galleries as freely as they walked in and out of competing knowledge systems and epistemic frames, has given way to the hush of empty halls and display spaces.

When we pause to consider the educational turn in contemporary art, we nurture the hope that the life-giving rain, which washes away certainty, be given its due. Getting wet in the rain was never as welcome as it is today.

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1 Our formulation of the unknown addressee owes a debt to Jacques Rancière's discussion of Cervantes' handling of Don Quixote's correspondence with his beloved Dulcinea. See Jacques Rancière, 'Althusser, Don Quixote and the State of the Text' in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*. Stanford University Press. 2004. pp.136-138.

2 For the forest spirit (yaksha's) request to a floating cloud to act as a messenger, see *Meghadootam* (The Cloud Messenger) a classical Sanskrit play by Kalidasa (c. 100 CE). For a useful translation see *Meghadootam (The Cloud Messenger) by Kalidasa: A Rendering from the Sanskrit into Modern English*. Rajendra Tandon (trans.) Rupa & Co. New Delhi. 2007.