The Play of Protagonists
Raqs Media Collective

Intoxication

To curate is to offer, metaphorically speaking, not just old wine in new bottles, or even new wine in no bottles, but also all that is entailed in so far as the cultivation of a vineyard, running of a distillery, maintenance of a cellar and the animation of a tavern are concerned, and all at the same time.

It is to create the conditions necessary for the intoxication of what is called '*rasa*' (aesthetic *jouissance*) in the Indic traditions to occur, and for sobriety to be called into question, as an aide and afterthought to the revelry, all the time. The curator is the distiller, bootlegger, tavern-keeper and barmaid of rasa, or aesthetic experiences.

Nothing

Can one curate a nothing by simply pointing to its presence, or, more accurately, to its absence?

When, for instance, we were making an exhibition (**Sarai Reader 09**) that stretched in time across nine months (1), we began with a few propositions and an empty space. The propositions would unfold into objects, situations, utterances, gatherings and questions. The space would become dense, even confusing, over time. Here the act of curation was also an act of anticipation. Here, art would become a place, as it gathered layers of unresolved relations and torsions to itself. It defied categorization and momentarily held in abeyance the distinctions between different kinds of protagonists, between the unfinished and finished, between art and non-art. It multiplied all available impulses and acts. It suspended judgement.

Sarai Reader 09 started empty of art works, but was temporally ambidextrous. It initially marked the present as a blank page, but reached out with both hands towards the past and the future. This made it a space of memory and propositions. Memory was embodied in the form of an archive of about three hundred thoughtful and idiosyncratic annotations done by artists/researchers across ten years of activity in Sarai (an interdisciplinary platform for independent research and practice co-founded by us in Delhi). Potential, or the propositional, took the form of a cascading set of publicly shared proposal for works that an increasing orbit of artists said they would like to produce within the remit of the exhibition. First there were thirty proposals, and then, as the first thirty were realized, their propositional character gave way to another thirty, and so on. All this took place in the shadow of a "yet-to-be" building that was also an embodied proposition—an imagined structure realized as a prototype for an un-built building, contained within an actual building.

The exhibition program welcomed people to converse with artists as they went about with their work. Every once in a while — every two months or so — the

calendar of the exhibition was marked by a day that we called an 'episode'. Each episode sign-posted the transition from one group of artists to another. This 'rolling' character of each episode facilitated a relay of works, attitudes, materials and conversations. Negotiations about how and when artists and their works would enter, occupy, and exit space and share time stretched the dimensions of the exhibition. Some did not withdraw and just kept working. Complicated conversations, adjustments and shifting modes of work and interaction surfaced, rippled or just dissipated as time passed. A "place" started emerging. This was a space made up of claims, counter claims, juxtapositions, overlaps, shrinkages, expansion, mergers, syncopations, and blurs. This mode of making a "place" over time was a discovery engendered by the curatorial procedure that trusted the propositional as a dynamic force. As the artists kept incrementing their presence, the gatherings gained momentum, grew denser, and stayed longer. Hours needed re-calibration. There were withdrawals; there were re-entries. Some entries gathered a greater intensity and an active collective presence. By the 4th episode, we had formally invited a hundred and twenty artists, but more than two hundred people claimed that they had been, or had become, artists at SR09. The term "artist" got thoroughly dismantled and explored by each protagonist; it became elastic. Our role as curators in this situation was also to observe overflows. The specificities of production of this space for interactions and generative play occurred at the intersection of two vectors—the initial curatorial propulsion, as well as the cascading extensions left in the wake of each protagonist. Some of these wakes are still visible, and will be, for long years to come.

When a curatorial summer school (2) began with the question, "How can we begin to curate with nothing?", we looked back at the experience of **Sarai Reader 09** and remembered how to weigh emptiness, taste absence; and find them both exhilarating things to think with.

Communal Luxury
Recently, during a discussion held as part of the Athens Biennale, we suggested that it may be worthwhile to search lineages for contemporary art gatherings and impulses. We offered a lineage that draws from the celebratory (albeit brief) moment of the Paris Commune. We know from Kristin Ross' engaging historical investigation of the actions proposed and enacted by the "Artists' Federation of the Paris Commune" of the idea of 'communal luxury': a festive mode of becoming for all; a revelry of energies of life for the commons.

Threshold Time
We feel we are in threshold time. The question of "forms of life" has opened up in diverse ways. The conditions of urgency that human beings encounter at the planetary level require us to (constantly) revisit key questions. Recently, one of us ran a seminar course on just trying to understand what it means to be called a human (3). It is limiting to stay within particular geo-political concerns anymore. To understand a place, any place, we have to think the world. To get a sense of the world, we have to engage with what is happening in a particular place. At a time of

pandemics, weather anomalies, contagious political processes, mass migrations, global memes and insurgent networks, each iteration of the act of curation can contribute to renewing of global conversations, as exhibitions can become periodic listening stations. With the decay of the idea of progress, teleological uncertainty has emerged over the last 30 years. Machine-to-human relations, the nature of humans, and humans within nature have all become extremely confusing. Most present theoretical adventures are trying to grapple with this blurry force-field. The curatorial today is a critical protagonist - and site - of exploring the potential of this moment.

Incubation
Curation distributes and disturbs the sites of discursive production, as well as forms of collegiality. In critical moments it becomes an incubator for uncertain images, ideas, and sensations. It keeps alive an unsettling enquiry about the way we cohere and give credence to what is pleasurable, what is abhorrent, what is distant and what is proximate, what is laughable and what is joyous in the world, and us. When, for instance, a classroom occupies a museum, (4) then the occasion of learning becomes a performance. The performance itself may become the exhibition. Each personal itinerary is relevant, as we are all part of the same interlocking set of realities. It's an ensemble of variegated personal investigations that can even suggest practical measures being taken by people to realize new worlds.

While curating **INSERT2014**, one of the propositions that brought in many artists into the ambit of the show was called **New Models for Common Ground** (5). Like **Sarai Reader 09**, **INSERT2014** was also an attempt to develop a non-thematic show where the venue (an under-utilized experimental mud-brick building called the Mati Ghar in the campus of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi) became as much of a protagonist as the artists themselves. Taking a cue from this re-imagined activation of a neglected building in the campus of a cultural institution like the IGNCA, the **Common Ground** proposition invited artists to make bold (or subtle) claims on the re-animation of buildings and places that have fallen off the map, or have disappeared from public life, or have otherwise vanished from the imagination of the city of Delhi. The project's aim was the articulation of a set of expressed desires for these spaces to re-emerge with a new vitality into the public imagination. Here, the intended curatorial intervention was to set in motion the incubation of forms of re-imaging space. The consequences of this move can only evolve and unfold over a *longue dureé*.

A Toolkit with Students
When a semester of teaching in a university (6) asks the question, "When does curatorial work end?", we might find ourselves traversing our questions all over again.

Ordinarily, the word 'curatorial' brings up in its wake an imagined apparatus that operates primarily by thematising, organizing, classifying, hierarchizing, and evaluating art and life. Curatorial pedagogy usually becomes the vehicle for the

transmission of this apparatus, its rules and its ruses, from one generation to another. The authoritative comfort that this transmission brings with it halts enquiries into the curatorial itself and turns students away from examining the thought processes at work behind curatorial practice. Our effort, when faced with a roomful of future curators, has been to disturb the harmonic ease of this transmission so as to catalyze a renewal of attention towards the dissonant pleasures of what we think are the foundations of curatorial practice.

Under such conditions, the classroom became a fevered zone; tinged by anxiety over the possible loss of control, and simultaneously touched by exhilaration at the thought of the gains to be made in terms of critical and creative freedom. Here, then, in conclusion, are a few questions that emerged from this turmoil.

- If one asks an artist to think of the seemingly impossible, like bringing a railway track into a gallery so as to represent that strange intersection that happens when people die on the tracks while rushing to get water, then, will the work end with the admission of the impossibility of representation, or will it renew the impulse?

- If one asks a dancer to perform, invoking the power of a witch, in total darkness, does the sound of her anklets in the dark mark a boundary or make porous collective anxieties of unfathomable feminine force?

- If one wants to tell a story of an artwork or of a practice, is it to be charged with fictive energies or with documentary alertness? Will it be your personal journey or will it stay away from it?

- If you confront a conflict, does it seep into your life or does it stay within a limit staged by an outer frame?

- If you encounter an extraordinary planet in the middle of an ordinary day, if there is the discovery of a way into a cave and with it into a sudden fold in geological time, how do you translate this back to your sense of time? Does it alter the balance of weights in objects, infusing them with ancient dreams or mis-recognized time machines?

- If a sketch book (for a thought process) contains intuition and interpretation in equal parts, and then decides to present itself through stitches, cut-ups and the like - which make puzzles out of interpretations and origami-fold-enigmas out of intuition - what would be the relationship between chance and will, between design and wayward-ness?

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(1) Sarai Reader 09, Devi Art Foundation Gurgaon. August 18, 2012 - April 14, 2013
(http://www.deviartfoundation.org/content/exhibitions/sarai-reader-09-exhibition)
(2) Moscow Summer School, V-A-C Foundation, 2013 (http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/moscow-curatorial-summer-school/)

(3) Silence, Reticence, and the Outburst: The Politics and Aesthetics of Listening, Keith Haring Lecture in Art and Activism, Bard College, 2015-16 (http://www.bard.edu/news/releases/pr/fstory.php?id=2701)
(4) A Myriad Marginalia, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), 2015 (http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/exhibitions/60_raqs_media_collective_a_myriad_marginalia)
(5) http://www.insert2014.in/new-models-for-common-grounds/
(6) School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, 2016 (http://inlaksfoundation.org/InlaksCuratorialLabs.aspx)