

Raqs Media Collective

Talks, publications and research;
whirling dervishes and urban design

by Francesco Manacorda

On their website Raqs Media Collective, who formed in 1992, explain that Raqs 'is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and means the state that whirling dervishes enter into when they whirl. It is also a word used for dance. At the same time Raqs could be an acronym for "rarely asked questions".' Based in Delhi, India, the collective comprises three artists – Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta – who meet at the crossroads of art, documentary filmmaking, new media and critical theory; their work operates on the cusp of theoretical explorations and metaphorical and aesthetic discourse.

A collective could be conceived as an ecosystem whose interaction produces operative or imaginative knowledge, political and performative actions or products by linking the specific interests of its members. Urban research is one of the main interests of Raqs Media Collective. Their investigations into cityscapes are not limited to architectural concerns but also embrace private, public, social and economic factors: they view urbanism as a systemic field of contemporary relations. The installation *The Wherehouse* (2004), for example, which was first shown at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, comprised panels, annotated books, sound and videos, along with a large collection of objects laid out on the floor – including a mirror, an umbrella, shoes, a knife and an old radio – all of which were found on the streets of the Belgian capital and labelled and classified to look like archaeological finds. Questioning the economic conditions of relocation and globalization, possible stories about the items were written on the labels, and expanded

upon on wall texts and recorded conversations, recounting the vicissitudes of the life of illegal immigrants in the European Union.

The work of Raqs Media Collective is not limited to installations for exhibition spaces. Its output includes talks, websites, conferences, publications and research produced in collaboration with Sarai, the Centre for the Study of Developing Society, in Delhi – a research group they co-founded with other practitioners and academics. Sarai is also a media lab and a platform for discussion that regularly produces an 'inter-disciplinary' journal, *Sarai Reader*. The work of Raqs often stems from the structure and procedures of theoretical inquiry, resulting in 'concrete research' that employs objects and new media. Their attitude is frequently reflected in their creative use of language – especially evident in their use of enigmatic titles with double meanings, such as *The KD Vyas Correspondence, Vol. 1* (2006), a fictional correspondence with the author of the *Mahabharata*, presented as 18 'video enigmas'. The structure of the traditional Hindu epic serves here to produce a reconsideration of time and the dissemination of meaning and myth.

With Respect to Residue (2004) reiterates the 'mis-use' of rhetorical figures in the construction of the work, in particular employing metaphor as a substitute for an object, technology or image. The work comprised 10,000 paper

The Wherehouse
2004
Mixed media
Installation view

With Respect to Residue
(detail)
2004
Printed paper
table mats
Approx. 22x28cm
each

The KD Vyas Correspondence, Vol. 1
2006
Mixed media
Installation view

tablemats, emblazoned with a map of the world, which were distributed to 11 restaurants and cafés around Liverpool. Employing *trompe l'oeil*, the map was partially covered by images of detritus (a fishbone, a tea-bag, cigarette butts, peanut shells) and included questions about the nature of residue, abandonment, memory and forgetfulness; the consequences of waste as rejected and discarded material.

Dissemination is a key element of Raqs' practice and is echoed in their website (www.raqsmediacollective.net), where every text they have produced is available and where they share information about their past and future projects. In 2006 they curated 'Building Sight', an exhibition that took place at the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart. The show elaborated on the collective's interest in urban design and occupation of space and included art works as well as films, text and research produced by architects, artists, curators, editors, designers, filmmakers and other collectives, a network of knowledge that described a multi-faceted and unfinished analysis of the rapidly developing Asian city. The mixing of registers, alongside the importation of strategies from one discipline to another, allowed for the space of the exhibition to become a semantic framework inside which new meaning could be produced, connections whispered and appropriate questions asked. In the vision of Raqs Media Collective the discursive is a domain that works ecosystemically, endlessly adapting itself to questions and conversations.

