



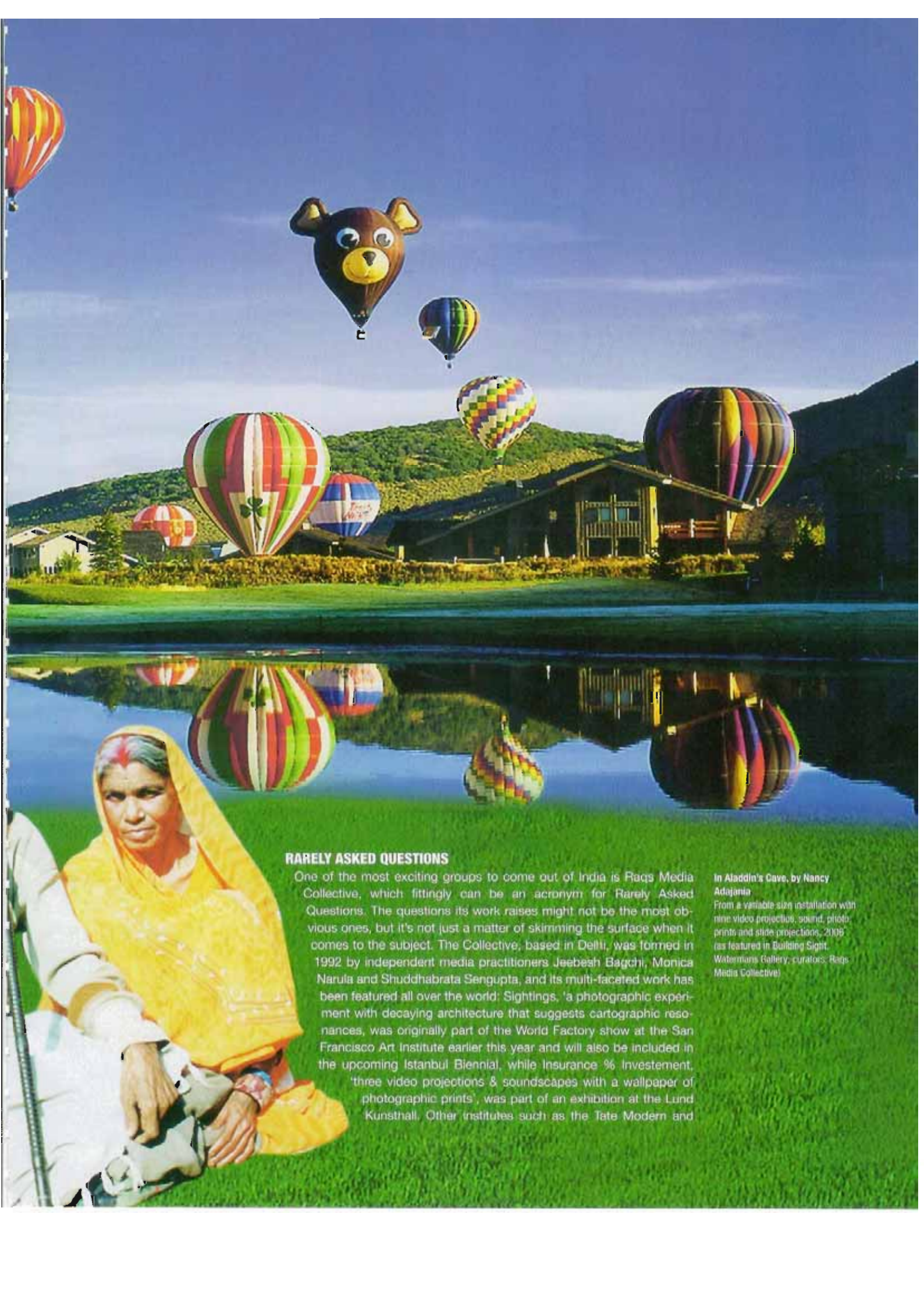
State of a Nation

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Delhi's Raqs Media Collective is just one of the participants in the Mattress Factory's two-part *India: New Installations* exhibition. Relocating the artists to work in residence at the Gallery in Pittsburgh is a fitting experience for a group of media practitioners who find the expression 'unique Indian quality' meaningless and instead emphasize the agile, nomadic and sometimes volatile nature of contemporary culture.

Text by Emma Firmin

India's position as a rising superpower certainly gives space to interpret what is actually meant by the term. You can look at things strictly in terms of economics and GDPs, but how this actually translates to life on the streets and in the country is a question that does more than float around. But it's no surprise that many international galleries and museums are re-experiencing the China Syndrome. There have been countless group or solo exhibitions in the past few years that hold up the contemporary artists in China as some kind of emerging form, as though the Western art world's rediscovery and embrace of the country's artists validates their creative efforts. Sometimes it's effective and certainly brings to the attention that which in the not so distant past would not have been a crowd pulling, but there are occasions where the nagging thought is that the only thing the artists share is the right to the same passport. India is now lined up as the next place to enter the heavyweight arena, and so you can expect to see plenty of exhibitions purporting to show the 'new' face of its contemporary artists.

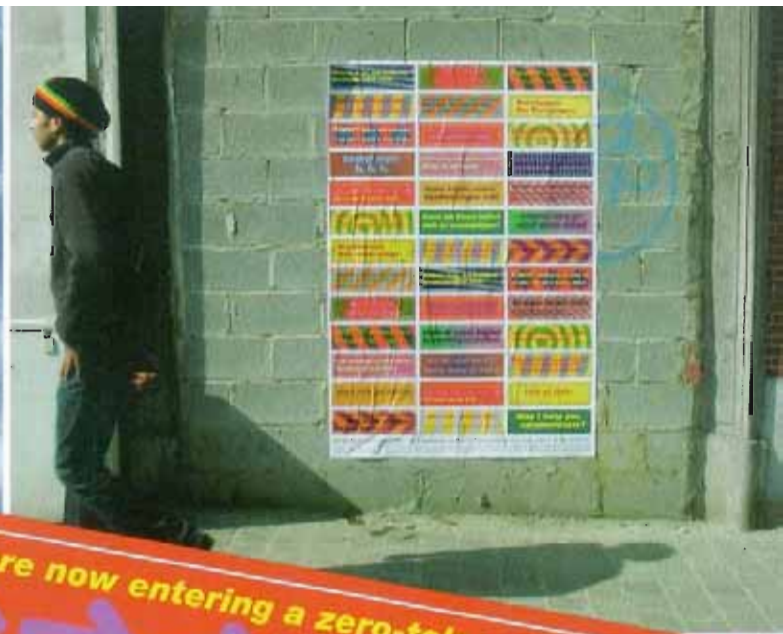


RARELY ASKED QUESTIONS

One of the most exciting groups to come out of India is Raqs Media Collective, which fittingly can be an acronym for Rarely Asked Questions. The questions its work raises might not be the most obvious ones, but it's not just a matter of skimming the surface when it comes to the subject. The Collective, based in Delhi, was formed in 1992 by independent media practitioners Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, and its multi-faceted work has been featured all over the world: Sightings, 'a photographic experiment with decaying architecture that suggests cartographic resonances, was originally part of the World Factory show at the San Francisco Art Institute earlier this year and will also be included in the upcoming Istanbul Biennial, while Insurance % Investment, 'three video projections & soundscapes with a wallpaper of photographic prints', was part of an exhibition at the Lund Kunsthall. Other institutes such as the Tate Modern and

In Aladdin's Cave, by Nancy Adajania

From a variable size installation with nine video projections, sound, photo prints and slide projections, 2006 (as featured in Building Sight, Watermans Gallery; curators: Raqs Media Collective)



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Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary have also featured its work, with the latter's show not an exclusive Indian experience, but a context in which the artists 'share a fundamental interest in ethnographic research, folklore, rituals and spirituality, as well as in exposing alternative histories and acts of commemoration.'

The Collective operate in a range of media in its engagement and investigation of urban spaces and global circuits, taking in image, sound, software, objects, performance, print, text and curatorial projects. Experiencing its work is like a headlong rush into modern life, with fragments of contemplation rising up through the energy. There's nothing mindlessly chaotic about it, any confusion is considered and the results can be both intimate and all consuming in an edgy sense of the contemporary. And while the idea of collective or network can be empty gestures in the hands of some, for Raqs it is one of the cornerstones of its work. Raqs is the co-initiator of Sarai: The New Media Initiative, a programme of interdisciplinary research and practice on media, city space and urban culture at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, which was set up in 2001. Websites are not always the most exhilarating of forms, but taking a look at the Sarai's portal gives some sense of the activity that is taking place not only in the cities of India but in the urban hot-spots of the world, whether it be spontaneous or structured.

GATHERING INFORMATION

One of the latest exhibitions that Raqs Media Collective has participated in is the India: New Installations project at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, USA. As curatorial director of this research and development laboratory for artists, Michael Olijnyk believes that, 'their baseline is gathering information. As a group, they have a complete new way of creating and thinking based on new technologies. Their works and their techniques are less about India, and more about the world and the time that we are living in.' Olijnyk, along with Mattress Factory executive & artistic director, Barbara Luderowski, initiated the project early in 2006, consciously aware of the increased media coverage that India was receiving for its culture, new technology, call centres and more. Olijnyk recalls how he and Luderowski travelled throughout India exploring the current culture and arts scene, and then invited ten Indian artists to come to Pittsburgh to work in residence and create new pieces: 'The works of these contemporary Indian artists combine the rich cultural traditions of India - reflecting the diversity of religions, ethnic groups, economic levels, languages and geography - with contemporary media and methods.'

Working within the setting of a residency certainly gives the exhibition, which has been arranged in two parts, added appeal, and Olijnyk describes the way the participants have been able to experience life in an urban American community and interact with neighbourhood residents, museum staff and visitors. So what was it about Raqs that made them right for the Mattress Factory project? Well, according to Olijnyk, 'we have worked with a couple of other collectives. Raqs seems to be different than the others in that they really look at their works as a group piece. Through discussion, and sometimes arguments, they came to consensus. They create together, and the end product doesn't look like any single artist has done it, or any individual part of it. Their finished pieces look like Raqs did them.'

For the Mattress Factory, where Raqs Media Collective's work includes the 'perfect' telephone pole, which had to be hoisted into the Gallery's fourth floor, and silk-screened images on stainless steel, both parts of the

Opposite page top, from left to right:
A Measure of Anacoustic Reason
From an installation with one projection, four screens, four dialogues, four lecterns, four benches with embedded speakers and a lightbox, 2005

Co-ordinates 28.8N 77.15E:
Rescension 02: Roomade Office for Contemporary Art, Brussels, 2003
From an installation using four projections, soundscape, slide projection and print elements [including broadsheet, floor mat and 18 kinds of stickers]

Opposite page middle:
'The Letter of Verification and Authenticity' from The KD Vyas Correspondence Vol. 1
One of the 18 letters in an installation with Video, Sound, Sculpture, Narrative, 2006

This page, from left to right:
'The moment that might have been is over. None but a nearby company of superheroes has seen the descent or gauged its impact'
Photo and text from 'Preface to a Ghost Story', 2006

A Wall + A Sofa by Cybermohalla Ensemble
From a variable size installation with nine video projections, sound, photo prints and slide projections, 2006



Clockwise:

Part of the Raqs Media Collective's project at the Mattress Factory; a telephone pole is hoisted into the Gallery's fourth floor.

'Please Do Not Touch The Work Of Art', in response to the signs seen by us in museums and galleries Postcard and email attachment, 2006

The Wherehouse, installation with 2 video projections, found objects, uniquely produced photo-books overlaid by handwritten notes, text panels, soundscape, spoken performance, photographs and web page: www.the-warehouse.net, 2004

exhibition are not necessarily a survey of Indian art but more a representation of what kind of art is currently happening in India. And as part of accompanying programme a series of discussions will address questions such as: How do contemporary visual artists relate to and diverge from traditional Indian art? Does globalisation impact contemporary and traditional arts in India today?

AGILE CONSTELLATION

In a current curatorial project by Raqs (Building Sight, Watermans Gallery, London) that responds to different ways of thinking about how a city is constructed, the Collective speak more of anticipation rather than representation when it comes to contemporary Indian creativity. You only have to look at a thrilling online conversation that took place in 2002 between members of the Collective and others engaged in the idea of translocation, to see where they are coming from. In an extract by the Collective's Monica Narula, questions about contemporary Indian culture are given sharp insight: 'For us, the idea of a "uniquely Indian quality" is not really meaningful, or expressive of anything at all. India is the name of a nation state, and "Indian" the term denoting nationality that happens to be entered in our passports... Those who use the term "Indian Culture" usually mean a complex of values, attitudes, and tendencies that have been processed to mark out a space that is "uniquely" theirs, and which mirrors an obsession with territoriality... We see culture, and cultural intervention as an agile constellation of people, practices, connections and objects that come into being when different disciplines, histories and attitudes encounter each other in a global cultural space. This does not mean that we subscribe to the view that there are no cultural differences, but that cultural affinities and differences are not reducible to the mere notations of current political cartography.'. #

India: New Installations, Part I, featuring Mansi Bhatt, Navin Thomas, Sudarshan Shetty & Krishnaraj Chonat, runs at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh until 25 November. Part II, with the work of the Raqs Media Collective, Anita Dube and Hema Upadhyay takes place from 9 September - 20 January 2008.

www.mattress.org / www.raqsmediacollective.net / www.sarai.net