

## **Meeting in a Waiting Room**

### **Interview of Raqs Media Collective by Cedric Vincent**

**Q: A critical assessment of modernity must start with the revelation of its hidden faces. What are the hidden faces of modernity?**

A: Perhaps modernity, like, capital, is a faceless entity, and what we see when we think we see the faces of modernity are actually a series of masks that do not in the end allow us to see a face. Remember, the cubist face is an African mask. This means that what you are asking for when demanding a critical assessment of modernity is the requirement to reveal masks, not uncover faces.

Let us consider one such mask that modernity wears, that of property. The consolidation of property as a singular form of ‘owning’, as we know it today, is in some ways co-terminus with the rise of modernity. Property, juridically, implies an exclusive system of ownership, whereby a person or a corporate entity or a state can claim that he/she/it has the exclusive rights to benefit from, manage, and transact away a thing - be it land, material goods, money, services or immaterial resources. Crucially, this also means a prohibition on the participation of others (those not legally entitled) in the stewardship and harnessing of the resources that are designated as a proprietor’s property, except on the terms determined by the property owner.

The situation on the ground however is much more complex than what (in historical terms) a relatively recently arrived at, and specifically juridical, understanding of property allows for. On the one hand there are complex, historically evolved and customary tenural forms and practices that erode the stability of this proprietorial model, and on the other hand there are contemporary instruments like loans and insurances and leases and mortgages that striate proprietorship with counterfactuals that have to do with the way in which state regulations and global financial institutions impact on ownership. Both of these require us to evolve a networked understanding of stewardship and control, in order even to be empirically consistent. However, the juridical understanding of property is clearly a mask that bears little resemblance to these networked realities. This fiction of a face helps some people and classes simplify the task of representing to themselves, and imposing on others, a narrative that flattens a complex web of claims and counter-claims within the single trope of exclusive ownership.

The idea of property has a powerful fictive presence which enables the mobilization of enormous productive energy even as it perpetrates intense violence on all that stands in its way. In the domain of intellectual labour and goods, it actually creates in a single stroke an infinite space for the expansion of exclusivist control while simultaneously converting abundance into scarcity. The mask of property endows the facelessness of capital with authority, velocity and currency.

This mode of seeing property can enable us - analogously - to arrive at a method for understanding modernity itself. The world that people inhabit is a complex lattice made

of elements of traditions (evolved, invented, borrowed, appropriated), innovations and improvisations. What people do with these elements is contingent on the balance of forces between needs, capacities, demands and the fluctuating relationships between vectors of power, lived practices, habits, ennui as well as emancipatory desires.

The language that privileges the taking of positions vis-à-vis modernity prohibits a rendering of this complexity except in terms of hierarchies based on chronology, provenance and location. All that cannot be accounted for is immediately invalidated. This does not allow us to take into consideration the fact that for many, the protocols of chronology, provenance and location are held in abeyance through daily acts of smuggling culture onto new and unlikely sites. Or that within a matter of decades, that which may have once seemed remote and elsewhere (a globally articulated cultural matrix) is suddenly proximate and present with a certain intensity.

Once again, like property, the imperative of having to take positions vis-à-vis modernity, helps actors (usually elites) of different descriptions, some of whom describe themselves as modernists, and even others who claim to speak with the authority of tradition, erase modes of being and acting that are not located neatly along the axes of established modernist binaries.

It may be more productive, in the end, to undertake a different set of moves, which may entail leaving the high road of the discussion of modernity for a set of byways and minor routes where we focus more on specificities, on evolving methods and modes that are able to speak in languages that are more conducive to the elaboration of concrete aesthetic, ethical, social and political questions; that are able to traverse a terrain that is wider and more generous (in historical, spatial and affective terms) than one founded on the anxieties attendant to the fictions of modernity.

**Q: You have elsewhere shown an interest in the concept of “off modern”<sup>1</sup>. Is “being off modern” more than an attitude? Is “being off modern” a way to escape from modernity or to be differently modern?**

It would be a great pity to reduce a concept as interesting as the ‘off modern’ to an article of faith or a badge of identity. Let’s take the ‘being’ out of the phrase ‘being off modern’. We think that the notion of ‘off modernity’ needs to be deployed with a certain lightness (at the same time with deadly intent), in order to be able to fully make use of its potential as a necessary defence against the certainties and authority of categories like modernity and tradition. Consequently, rejecting the authority of modernity does not mean a move away from modernity. We do not think in terms of ‘escapes from modernity’. Where would one escape to?

Rather, what we are interested in is what Boym calls ‘detours into unexplored

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<sup>1</sup> Svetalana Boym, *Nostalgic Technology: Notes for an Off Modern Manifesto* <[http://artefact.mi2.hr/\\_a03/lang\\_en/theory\\_boym\\_en.htm](http://artefact.mi2.hr/_a03/lang_en/theory_boym_en.htm)>

potentialities of the modern project'. This does not mean a search for 'alternatives' or 'different modernities'. That would be the case if they were different models that one could pick and choose from, rejecting 'this' modernity for 'that' modernity.

The idea of 'unexplored potentials' has an interesting temporal connotation. It suggests something that exists or has existed, somewhat contingently (otherwise it would not be 'unexplored', simply because you cannot explore something that is not there, at least incipiently, or as a trace, even if it is not fully realized), and is at the same time waiting to be acted upon. Something that could have been and may yet be again - an intersection of the possible past and the contingent future on the ground of the present continuous.

Tied to this is the idea of a continuous rehearsal. Of trying on different guises, doing and becoming different things in anticipation of different ends. The rehearsal is always a process, never a product; it is never able to meet the demand of completeness or comprehensiveness. When you rehearse, you do not perform. Instead, you wait to perform, and while you wait, you practice your moves. The 'unexplored potentials of the modern project', the might-have-beens of modernity, are akin to rehearsals and improvisations.

**Q: Does this suggest a kind of 'waiting in the wings' attitude towards modernity? Trying out moves, an eternal playing out of possibilities?**

These aspects of the experience of modernity can be seen as the vestibules that connect to it, without necessarily being ahead or behind. We have found it useful to think of these spaces of rehearsal and improvisation as the 'waiting rooms', or 'antechambers' or 'green rooms' of modernity. The relationship between these spaces and modernity is not however marked by chronological or temporal lag alone ('anxious to catch up', or 'paranoid about being left behind'). Rather, it could also be qualified by perennial anticipation, or eternal nostalgia, or perpetual regret, or enduring scepticism, or sustained enthusiasm, or continuing bewilderment - or combinations thereof. What you have then is the possibility of a nuanced and fluid spectrum of attitudes towards modernity that can be rehearsed ad infinitum in these 'green rooms' or 'waiting rooms'.

It might sound odd to insist on the nomenclature of the 'waiting room' and yet abjure chronology, but one can wait for something that one knows may not arrive in the way one expects it to, just as one can rest indefinitely in the interval of an unconcluded journey. Railway stations in India also call their waiting rooms 'retiring rooms' and the two terms are used interchangeably without a thought as to the fact that 'waiting' and 'retiring' seem to suggest two radically different attitudes to time. The fact that the same space can be used to 'wait' and 'retire' in, is more than a happy lexical accident.

**Q: I could argue following the anthropologist Michel-Raolph Trouillot that modernity is a geography of management that creates places for political and economic purposes and, simultaneously, a particular mode of imagination, which privileges chronological primacy. I find this kind of geography referred to in your work in *With Respect to Residue* (2004) and '28°N / 77°15' E::2001/02, *The***

***Coordinates of Everyday Life (2002) for instance ?***

**A:** Yes, we are in sympathy with this line or argument. And by way of response, would like to share with you a text embedded in a set of table-maps from *With Respect to Residue* that feature ornamental maps of the world, overlaid by images of the residue of four primary commodities, tea, tobacco, peanuts and fish. Here is the text that accompanies the table map with tea bags

“The extraction of value from any material, place, thing or person, involves a process of refinement. During this process, the object in question will undergo a change in state, separating into at least two substances: an extract and a residue.

Tea leaves and tea dust, tea dust and a tea bag, a tea bag and a cup of tea, a cup of tea and a shot of caffeine, a shot of caffeine and a slight spike of energy, a spike of energy and a decision, a decision and its consequences, the consequences and a fragment of history, a fragment of history and a tea economy, a tea economy and tea leaves, tea leaves and tea dust, and so on.

With respect to residue: it may be said it is that which never finds its way into the manifest narrative of how something (an object, a person, a state, or a state of being) is produced, or comes into existence. It is the accumulation of all that is left behind, when value is extracted.

Large perforations begin to appear in chronicles, calendars and maps, and even the minute agendas of individual lives, as stretches of time, tracts of land, ways of being and doing, and entire clusters of experience are denied substance.

There are no histories of residue, no atlases of abandonment, no memoirs of what a person was but could not be.

Everything is valuable, yet all things can be laid waste.

The sediments that precipitate at the base of our experience of the world can, however, decompose to ignite strange sources of light, like will o’ the wisps in marshlands by night. Sometimes, this is all the illumination there can be in vast stretches of uncertain terrain.”

**Q: Modernity is an expression of an implicit understanding that we are all part of the same global cultural process? Would you agree? What about globality as a contemporary condition?**

**A:** We think it is time we re-examined the easy conflation of the terms modern and global. Barring the case of those isolated populations (in Melanesia and South America) who survived for very long without a ‘first contact’ with the outside world, it is difficult to sustain the argument that any societies or cultures have in fact been insulated in any significant way from the condition we clumsily name ‘globality’. The routes that all our

ancestors have taken across continents are inscribed into every little detail of everyday life, in food, language, attire, sensibility and sentiments. This is not a uniquely contemporary condition. Most people have been 'global' in more ways than we care to imagine for much of human history.

This does not however mean that we all participate in the same global cultural process. We participate in different global cultural processes. The 'global' processes available to a football fan are different from the 'global' processes accessed by religious zealots, or fashion victims, or software programmers, or contemporary artists - but each one of these is a distinct global process. It is no more or less global than any other. Similarly, the world, as a whole, looks and feels different in a pirate electronic goods market in Delhi from the way it does in a mall in the same city. And the world looks very different again, in a container port in northern Europe from the way it does in a coffee plantation in Southern India. However, all these places are intensely connected, through commerce, through the movement of goods and people, through what happens to the coffee that gets picked in the plantation and offloaded in the container port. Each place is a centre of the world. Same world, different centres.

There are many different ways of drawing a map of the world, and many different kinds of wills, impulses and desires connected to the acts of drawing such maps. There is not now, nor has there ever been, a monad of global realities. Coming to terms with the contemporary condition requires us to understand this very simple fact - we inhabit not one, but many intersecting, overlapping and also disconnected maps of the world. We always have. The interesting thing to do is to plot different routes that people take in different worlds, and see where these journeys intersect. This means looking for the encounter that the football fan has with the religious zealot, or the contemporary artist has with the knowledge worker, in the course of their different journeys. The contemporary condition actively requires us to construct maps of maps, routes made up of different routes, journeys that are the consequences of many different acts of travel.