

## Premonitory Machines

When a collective interacts with a space one expects that a machine should result: an exhibition machine. The products of this spatio-temporal machine are not just artworks but the movement and stasis of spectators themselves. In producing, this machine only seems smoothly functioning yet is itself disjointed—and so must be its products. Seemingly free in having entered this gallery without coercion, the automatons that we call the subjects of spectating similarly are exposed and divided by this exhibition apparatus in the to-and-fro of their scopical functioning. As outside in society, so inside an exhibition.

So at the entrance, the emergency that introduces and runs through the exhibition is continually announced as the steady state of premonition, even though “emergency lights flicker away a wasting sense of urgency.” From the start, the swirling lights of *Premonition* make us tread warily.

The exhibition then offers two paths, but they are not easy or assured. The one straight ahead with a terminus in view rather is an obstacle course. In order to move ahead we need watch our step as we encounter pitfalls. The first challenge is one of *Auto Measure*. Are the three sunken photographic light boxes—one of a donkey, another of a surveyor, the last of a tripod—a rebus for the Raqs Media Collective itself with its three members? No, but we are met there in this sandy desert scene with the age-old auto-referring question of identity that the Sphinx (not a Yaksha) riddled: “What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?” Passing this test in the light of high noon is no success if time itself is riddled. More than just triangulated between its tenses of past, present, and future, time itself is fractured. Premonition haunts time and disrupts its unbroken smooth flow forward. Progress is not (self)-assured. Time here rather is achronological. The future that beckons us with its fluctuating video glare from the far wall of the gallery is not what was past promised by the progress of history.

Thus we move on wending our way toward this flickering light as if through a mirage, not of images but of their absence, past empty translucent Plexiglas frames that drip their décor as if the entropic waste of a depleted forest. We are conveyed forward, fuel to the fire of industry’s cauldron, but we find wasting technology having preceded us as if an advancing Birnam wood had upset capital’s logic there. For a tree grows from the desuetude chimney of a derelict Kolkata jute factory, the pixilated animation of its bewitching foliage having supplanted the semaphore smoke signals testifying to onward and upward industrial production [(*Landscape at Baranagar, Factored for*) *Déjà Vu and Distance*].

The future took a turn that idled this factory; history was provenance with no progeny for its haunted shell. The present is only a haunted intersection of an occluded past and a failed future. And so we veer from this ruin, which is now a monument to a different order of time than its genesis, to turn around to the second exhibition path, down that oblique other corridor. Perhaps we should have been warned already by *Auto Measure* that the future was not forward, warned by its void that the triangulated third produces a swerve instead. Onward is ever wayward.

We are caught once more by some other dubious image, by an odd performance of images, at its end. Yet getting there, in transit down that corridor past other works, do we know that we are scanned by these images as much as we scan them passing by? X-

rayed to the bone in *We the Fuel*. All that is solid may melt in the air but here spectrographic metrics measure another grinning countenance. No neutral mug shot gaze, a grimace is all we leave behind—a residue more resistant than rusting factory steel.

The end is a mug’s game, though. In a room named after a century, a protagonist mugs before us trying out faces and costumes, but whether as a simpleton or thug we do not know [*They Called it the Twentieth Century* (from “The Impostor in the Waiting Room”)]. They called it the twentieth century but it was only a waiting game. Maybe a costume foretelling future performance is a key to unlock the crypt of its beckoning. Departure beckons like the chimney beacon forestalling us once again in a waiting room. Stationary though seemingly destined, we rest there in this antechamber to modernity, waiting for, anticipating, even expecting our eventual entry into history. Colonials of one stripe or another, we wait for departure in this dead end room with no exit.

“The image of the ‘waiting room’ gestures towards the sense of incompleteness and elsewhere-ness that fills those spaces of the world about which the overriding judgment is that they are insufficiently modern—that they are merely patchy, inadequate copies of ‘somewhere else’. Such waiting rooms exist in the very heart of that ‘somewhere else’—in New York and Los Angeles, in London and Singapore—but it is outside these islands that they have their truest extent. Most of the world, in fact, inhabits such antechambers of modernity. We know such antechambers well; we are at home in them, everywhere.”

The Raqs Media Collective is no key to the departure door, its members no gatekeepers. Impostors then? No, not performers themselves like the man in the video but tellers of our tales, travelling where thought must go. For them this exhibition is a way station as they move on, while for us it is a waiting room. Time for us in this waiting room and exhibition space is durational, merely situational, whereas the time of the work there is fractured. To take on the time of the work would be our task, not fated but faced with its haunting facets reordering our histories into other premonitions.

Philip Monk  
April 2011