

## Words in Art: India's Raqs Media Collective see all words as equal

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### WORDS TEXT INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

Indian artist group Raqs Media Collective is the first to be featured as part of our new words-in-art series. In this interview, Raqs talks about how they use written language to express their particular views and thoughts within their new media works.

#### What does Raqs reveal in this interview? Among other things...

- Group conversation and discussion, and the recording of this narrative, is integral to their art practice
- Their biggest challenge to date was the curation of "The Rest of Now" for Manifesta 7 in 2008
- The group likes to use words that leave the reader asking questions and for them, words have no hierarchy
- The installation *Skirmish* (2010) is part of an ongoing series of 'love stories'
- Time is often explored in artwork by Raqs and is a concept that particularly interests the group; they discuss *Escapement*
- A show at Experimenter Gallery in February, 2011, is announced as well as a new light sculpture, *Revoltagé*.

**Raqs Media Collective** is a group of three media practitioners who are based in New Delhi. Jeebesh Bagchi (1965), Monica Narula (1969) and Shuddhabrata Sengupta (1968) founded the collective as a way to pursue their interests in documentary filmmaking after completing graduate school in New Delhi.



Raqs Media Collective, 'Please Do Not Touch the Work of Art', installation, shown at Nature Morte (2006, New Delhi). Image courtesy of artists.

Raqs is best known for **contributing to contemporary art** through incorporating into their work aspects of media history and research, criticism and curation, archives and databases, new media and digital art, the building of open and public spaces for cultural practice, still photography and graphic design. An important feature of their practice is the search for new forms of producing and disseminating information and cultural material by using the Internet and cyberculture.

### **Raqs on Raqs**

**Can you tell us about Raqs Media Collective? When was it formed?  
Are all of the original members still in the collective?**

We formed ourselves into Raqs Media Collective shortly after graduating together from an MA programme in film and video making in 1992. The collective was made because we, [Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta], wanted to work together. That is still the case today.

**How does the Raqs Media Collective operate or function?**

As it always has. We function through a lot of conversation, through exploring things and experiences together, through travelling together, through sending each other things to look at and read, through debate and disagreement, through intuitive understanding, arising from a deep sense of each other's private languages, like of the things we mean to say, even when we don't always have the words to say them.

**Where were you each educated?**

All three of us were educated at a university in Delhi. Monica studied English Literature, Jeebesh studied Physics and Sociology and Shuddha studied Sociology. Monica travelled to different places for schooling, both within and outside of India. Jeebesh and Shuddha were in Delhi through their school years. All three of us met at the **Jania Millia Islamia University** in Delhi, for a post-graduate degree in Mass Communications in film and video.

**Has Raqs Media Collective changed in any way since its**

## establishment? How and what has caused these changes?

The form of the collective has not changed. We are the same three people since the collective began. Of course, [we] as people have changed, as it would be natural over the course of almost twenty years. We have grown, our interests and curiosities have broadened. We began with a commitment to filmmaking and now we are doing many other things. We make art, we publish, we curate, we create spaces and situations. But some of the things that excited us in our early twenties still matter to us.



## What achievement as Raqs Media Collective are you most proud of?

The survival as a collective. Our commitment to each other and our willingness to keep challenging each other, and be challenged by each other.

## What is the biggest challenge that Raqs Media Collective has faced in art?

The biggest challenge that we have faced to date has been **the curation of "The Rest of Now" for Manifesta 7 in 2008** (*second event listed – after click scroll down*). It was an ambitious exhibition in a large venue. There were many difficult aesthetical, conceptual and logistical questions to handle. As artists, we also had to prove to ourselves that we could curate. We enjoyed this experience immensely and also learnt a lot from it.

## Words in art

**For this article we are exploring the use of text in contemporary art production. When did Raqs first begin to use words in the art you produce? What made you choose to use them? How did you get to the idea of incorporating words into your work?**

We have always written notes to each other so text has always been an

important means of communicating within ourselves and of archiving our conversations. Our work with words emerges from this habit. We realised pretty early that fragments of our notes had an almost performative character. Meaning that they could stand alone for consideration.

**Can you give me an example of how you have used words in an early work?**

The first work to use words was also our first major work shown in an art space, *The Coordinates of Everyday Life* (2002; also: *Coordinates 28.8N 77.15E*). This work was shown in **Documenta 11** in 2002. [It] featured stickers, which repurposed what we heard ... the city ... whispering to us, as gossip, rumours, warnings, caveats and prophecies.

Editor's note: *The Coordinates of Everyday Life* was Raqs Media Collective's first installation.



Raqs Media Collective, 'Co-ordinates 28.8N 77.15E', 2001-2002, installation using 4 projections, soundscape, slide projection and print elements (including broadsheet, floor mat and 18 kinds of stickers). Image courtesy of artists.

**In *Skirmish* (2010) you were using words in your works. How was *Skirmish* made and how long did it take to create this work?**

*Skirmish* came out of a stay in **Damascus** in 2008. It was made several months after we saw stenciled outlines of keys that were advertising a key maker's services on several Damascus walls. Sometimes it takes a long time for a work to shape itself. These keys stayed with us as an image. Something of the restlessness of a Middle Eastern city, its intersection of public quietude and private secrets, comes through in this work.

**What is the meaning behind *Skirmish*? Is there a story behind it?**

We realised that there was a strong erotic charge to street life in a place like Damascus. It worked in the way people glanced at each other, discreetly, as if they were out on an assignation, to rendezvous with a lover. *Skirmish* is a bitter love story. It suggests combat, but the confrontation is between the desires and memories of two estranged

lovers. We like words that leave the reader asking questions. That is why we chose *Skirmish* for the title of this piece.

We have already talked about how *Skirmish* emerged from our time in Damascus. But it is one of a series of 'love stories' with words and images that we have been working on. We enjoy their brevity and the fact that they allow us to enter into a space of intimacy along with the viewer. The words nudge the viewer to a state that ideally is wordless. In that sense, the words are an aid to silence.



### **How do you choose the words you use?**

There is no strict method. A lot happens through trial and error. Words make their way into our consciousness from everywhere. From graffiti, from street names and signs, posters, notices, fragments of text blown along with pieces of paper in the wind, the refrains of songs, snatches of conversation. We read cities like one would read a novel. Page by page, line by line. We read everything from philosophy to pornography. We read dictionaries and telephone books. Words are our friends, our allies, and our kith and kin.

### **Why did you choose these words? Do they have any special meaning to Raqs as a collective or to any of you as individuals?**

All words and all images are special to us. We do not discriminate between the sensory data that we receive. There is no hierarchy. There are no good or bad words. The words that make their way into a work are the words that fit the work. Not all our works have words in them. Some works need silence, some works work through illegible means.

### **Could you explain your idea of language and what it means to each of you as individual artists, but also to Raqs as a collective? What does it mean to Raqs' work?**

Language exists even when there are no words. Our first thoughts and utterances, as babies, have no words to them. Still they are language. As artists, we view language as a stream, something to dip into, something to splash about in, something to drink from, something to swim in, to float in and to feel the current of. Language sustains us, but we know when to come out of the stream, to just sit by its side and watch it flow, without necessarily saying anything.

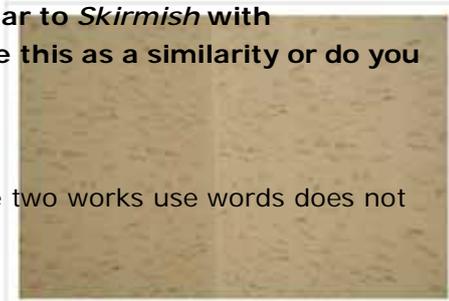
**Was the group inspired by any other artists who use words in their art? Who?**

We have found our usage of words resonating with that of others. **Michael Snow, Ian Wallace, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Mary Kelly, Marcel Broodthaers.** Even in the cancellations in the manuscripts of **Rabindranath Tagore.**

***The Librarian's Lucid Dream* is similar to *Skirmish* with its incorporation of text. Do you see this as a similarity or do you view the works as entirely separate?**

Each work is separate. Just because two works use words does not mean that they are similar.

*Skirmish* is a story. *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* is more like a collection of short found poems, haiku composed out of the titles of books in a library.



Raqs Media Collective's 'The Librarian's Lucid Dream' (2010, installation view-detail) was shown at Kolkata's Experimenter gallery in 2010 as part of the exhibition "This is Unreal" installation view-detail. Image courtesy of Gallery Experimenter.

**What inspired Raqs to create *The Librarian's Lucid Dream*? How was *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* conceived?**

The procedure of making the work is completely different. This work emerged out of **a residency in the Asia Art Archive**, where we spent a long time in the library of the Archive. We wanted to leave [the work] behind as a gift to the librarian and in honour of the diligence and delicacy that is involved in a librarian's work.

**What does the title *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* mean and what does it have to do with your use of text? Why did you choose the words that you did and how did you choose these words?**

We love libraries, and you could say that this work marks that love. The words were chosen from the titles of books. They were then recombined as if they were the pieces of a puzzle. The result is a series of playful accidents that create their own constellations of meaning.

**In 2009, Raqs made an installation called *Escapement* using clocks. Instead of the usual numbers on the clocks, words were incorporated. "Epiphany", "guilt", "awe", "panic" and "ecstasy" were some of the words that you used. What inspired you to create *Escapement*? What does the title mean?**

We think a lot about time in our work. *Escapement* comes out of that process. "Escapement" is a very special word. It means the mechanism inside mechanical watches and clocks that catches and releases the hour, minute and second hands in the way that makes it possible for a clock to tick its way through time. We like its connotation with escape. *Escapement* is about escaping as well as being bound up in time.

**Why did you choose these words? What does *Escapement* have to do with the use of these words?**

The words that make up the hours on the face of the clocks that constitute the clocks in *Escapement* are also portals. Each word takes

you to a different place, to a different emotional station, and the clocks themselves are configured across cities inhabiting different time zones to create a ... map of the world.

**When did you create *Escapement*? How was *Escapement* made? How long did it take to make?**

*Escapement* from 2009 is actually a rework of an older idea that dates back to 2002. You could say that this work has been seven years in the making. In a practical sense, conceiving the work and designing and producing the clocks, took about nine months.



Raqs Media Collective, 'Escapement (installation detail)', 2009. Image courtesy of artists.

**With the way in which the works use their words, we find *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* and *Escapement* similar to each other. Are they?**

On the contrary, we think they are quite far apart. *Escapement* has a certain precision. *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* is like its title: dreamy, playful, composed out of a delight in random discoveries.

**Did one inspire the other?**

Actually no. One did not inspire the other.

Editor's note: *Skirmish* and *The Librarian's Lucid Dream* were shown as part of a group exhibition at Kolkata gallery Experimenter in 2010. [Click here to read what co-owner Prateek Raja has to say about both these works.](#)

**General art creation**

**Why do you work with this specific medium, both with video and digital? Does the use of this medium relate to your use of text?**

Video allows you to see as well as listen, simultaneously, as you record. In that sense it comes close to a syn-aesthetic sense of how humans perceive the world. We find that interesting. It is a medium close to the work of memory. And we have an abiding interest in the ethics and aesthetics of remembering and forgetting. Words are tools and useful for remembering things. Words and images are like lovers, sometimes they quarrel, often they mate.

**What are you trying to achieve or communicate through your art? How do you want people to feel and think when viewing your works?**

We are simply trying to create conditions for thought in a distracted world. We are committed to stretching the time it takes to think things through. to experience the pleasure of encounters and discoveries. We

want people to come away from our work with a renewed affection for the magic that lies hidden beneath things that are familiar.

**How do you believe people actually feel and think when viewing your work?**

We think that people respond to our hints, to our ironies and secrets, to our little tugs at the edges of their minds. We think this gives them pleasure; sometimes it connects them to things in themselves they barely knew.

**What is the next project Raqs will be working on?**

We are working on a show centered around the word 'premonition' that opens in Calcutta at the Experimenter Gallery in February, 2011. We are also beginning to work on a light sculpture constellation around a word we made up, called *Revoltagé*. We see this as the starting point of an installation that involves text and light bulbs. There are several other works in the making, which are wordless.

**Will Raqs Media Collective continue to work with words or text in its art practice?**

Yes, we will continue to work with text and words in our art practice. We see no reason not to. Exactly as we will continue to work with images, textures, light, sound, surfaces, objects, volumes and densities. We will work with everything that is necessary to communicate whatever it is that we are thinking.



Raqs Media Collective. Image from oca.no.

**About our words-in-art interview series**

You may have read **our recently published post** on the use of words in Asian contemporary art. We identified six different artists and artist groups and interviewed them, asking them to talk about why and how they use words, script and text in their works and why language is significant to their work and their world.

We would like readers to note that we hope to provide an insight into, rather than a comprehensive study of, the feature of words in art. Also, as we are focussing on a specific geographical area, Asia, we realise that this in no way represents a worldview of the concept and we welcome comments from readers regarding the use of text and words by artists living and creating in areas outside the Asian region.

Who will we be interviewing next? It could be any one of the following artists: **Hung Keung** (Hong Kong), **Sujata Bajaj** (India), **Wenda Gu** (China), **Manuel Ocampo** (the Philippines) and **Josephine Starrs** (Australia). To find out more about what these artists have to say about words in art, please follow our series over the coming weeks.

JAS/KN/HH

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