



This page: **Raqs Media Collective, *On the Other Hand*, 2009**, diptych, ink on paper, overall 24 x 16". Opposite page: **Raqs Media Collective, *Escapement (detail)*, 2009**, twenty-seven clocks, aluminum with LED lights, monitors, video, audio. Installation view, Frith Street Gallery, London.

AT THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF DEVELOPING SOCIETIES, an independent research institution located in a leafy neighborhood in North Delhi, a clock with a curious face hangs on the wall of the library, portending an uncertain future as it presides over the reading room. Its numbers have been switched out for a list of emotions oscillating among the disquieting, the banal, and the revelatory: ANXIETY, DUTY, GUILT, INDIFFERENCE, AWE, FATIGUE, NOSTALGIA, ECSTASY, FEAR, PANIC, REMORSE, EPIPHANY, reads the litany.

Established in 1963, the center supports collaborative and interdisciplinary research initiatives, many on progressive social movements. Studies there have sought to question “any one conception of modernity and received models of development and progress” while addressing, more specifically, the “creative use of local traditions in the making of multiple and alternative modernities.” To place this clock at the intellectual heart of such an institution is to announce both the timeliness and the fragility of these endeavors, confirming the fretful character of a historical moment for which, it seems, no stable coordinates of cultural identity exist. The clock counts down the affective stakes around the creative uses of knowledge today, as it would be apportioned among any community of like-minded users—distributed, that is, across a contemporary commons. And so, it is not surprising that the timepiece makes an equally charged appearance on the homepage of the website of Raqs Media Collective. Founded in Delhi in 1992 by theorists, media practitioners, and artists Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta (then students in the department of communications at National Islamic University), Raqs has forged a practice in which a rethinking of artistic collectivism is indivisible from the larger fate of the commons itself. Freed of the bricks-and-mortar actuality of a research institute and, by extension, of the territorializing demands of gravity, the clock thus functions as a logo of sorts for Raqs, greeting an audience well beyond the Delhi intelligentsia as it appeals to the unknown yet urgent prospects for knowledge produced and shared among communities in locales around the world as well as online.

An understanding of these prospects—and of the Raqs project more generally—is necessarily bound to a broader view of the relationship between art and collectivism, and specifically of the various senses in which the latter term has recently been deployed. In the art world’s ongoing preoccupation with all things “political,” the collective is a durable if battle-worn trope, its significance keyed to matters of resources, practices, and objectives held in common. But while its avant-garde pedigree was established in the 1920s (here the Russian Constructivists are paradigmatic) and ’60s (the Art Workers Coalition), the collective has of late regained ground with features scarcely recognizable as old-school Comintern aesthetics (an evolution that receives welcome illumination in the 2007 essay collection *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination*

*After 1945*, edited by Gregory Sholette and Blake Stimson). Although their activist mandate might well be intact, today’s groups are as likely to shadow the logic of the corporation as that of the co-op, as predisposed to emulate the think tank as the factory floor—as if to trace, by proxy, the fitful peregrinations of the free market. If ours is the hapless age of what economists from Ludwig von Mises to Kenneth J. Arrow long ago called consumer sovereignty—the neoliberal dream of a client-*cum*-market state—little explanation is required to justify such a surge in this type of collective activity. Even so, the appearance of these new collectives, with their tendency to critically appropriate organizational forms consistent with bureaucratic agendas (think the Yes Men, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, or Bureau d’études), announces a marked shift from the ways collectives have been historically imagined relative to their ideological filiations.

To parse the differences between earlier models of collectivity and these more recent approaches: Generally speaking, if collectives of the past traded on the appearance of their support for or opposition to a given political ambition, prizing visibility as part of their strategic arsenal, collective practices now are often recondite in nature, stealthy in their negotiation of shared interests, and deeply skeptical about the politics of representation as such. Which stands to reason, given the state of affairs today. The more the public sphere—the basis for any conception of the commons—is aggressively despoiled by the ethos of consumer choice, and the more the “vote with your wallet” mentality poaches the language of participatory democracy, the more pressing the stakes of the collective’s fortunes become. Hence a new spin on the age-old drama of the collective

versus the individual: In the latest version of this narrative, the consumer sovereign—the neoliberal incarnation of the individual—lords over the commons by fiat. The collective, in an ironic twist, refuses to share in the process. This refusal, however, is not the same thing as conceding to the land-grab philosophy of the consumer sovereign but is rather an attempt to bypass, and thus reimagine, the conventional means by which resources are held in common.

Such is the case with Raqs Media Collective. *Raqs* stands for “rarely asked questions,” a pithy reversal of the “frequently asked questions” page standard to countless websites: For the group, such questions appeal to

# How to Be a Collective in the Age of the Consumer Sovereign

PAMELA M. LEE on [Raqs Media Collective](#)



just *what* is being shared, and how. “There is only one way of possessing something, but there can be countless ways to share it,” Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta write in their 2006 image-text essay *Fragments from a Communist Latento*. The diversity of the commons, in other words, challenges the singularity of property. This proposition, of course, constitutes a departure from the neo-Malthusian fatalism of Garrett Hardin’s 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” a brief on the impending catastrophe of population explosion and resource depletion. Hardin used the example of a field shared by herdsman grazing their flocks to argue for the necessity of controlling the commons. Raqs, for its part, demonstrates just how far we have traveled from this model. The group works both within and in excess of the commons’ territorial requirements and the proprietary measures restricting access to it. In installations sourcing a wealth of old and new media, the trio is apt to take up, among a host of issues, the digital public domain, communications under the pressures of globalization, the nonsynchronous experience of modernity (as in the 2007 installation *Time Book*, which features four disused factory clocks, evoking the industrial imperative to track worker productivity by the hour, minute, and dollar), and the politics of mobility and dislocation in train to these linked phenomena (as allegorized in *There Has Been a Change of Plan*, 2007, a suite of four photographs of a plane, one showing its nose removed in a gesture of aeronautical decapitation). Posing questions of this sort, however, does not mean Raqs’s art is reducible to such thematics. Far from it: The group’s responses are as open-ended as its visual rhetoric is gnomic, confirming legal

This page, from left: Raqs Media Collective, *Fragments from a Communist Latento* (detail), 2006, text and photographic essay for *Make Everything New: A Project on Communism*, ed. Grant Watson, Gerrie van Noord, and Gavin Everall. Raqs Media Collective, *Time Book*, 2007, telephone pole, video projections, enamel screenprint on stainless steel, enamel screenprints on acrylic, digital ink-jet print on galvanized steel, digital screen, clocks, fiberglass insulation, paint. Installation view, Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh. Opposite page, from left: Raqs Media Collective, *There Has Been a Change of Plan* (detail), 2007, four color photographs, each 38 x 54”. Raqs Media Collective, *A Measure of Anacoustic Reason* (detail), 2005, projection, screens, lecterns, benches, audio equipment, dimensions variable. From the 51st Venice Biennale.

scholar Lawrence Lessig’s suggestion in *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (2001) that “not knowing how a resource will be used” is a *good* thing.

In keeping with such diversity and openness, Raqs—though it has been a mainstay of the biennial circuit for close to a decade, appearing in Documenta 11 in 2002 and the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2005; and while Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta were among the six curators of last year’s Manifesta—in fact

occupies an amphibious space within and beyond the art world. The three members are also active in Sarai, a new-media initiative they founded in 1998 with Ravi S. Vasudevan and Ravi Sundaram, both scholars of media and urbanism. Such blurring of boundaries between spheres of activity is only amplified by the group’s nominal associations. Besides meaning “rarely asked questions,” *raqs* is also a Persian, Arabic, and Urdu word that translates as “dance” but more specifically indicates the state that dervishes enter when they whirl. Given the overlapping and nested spaces the group inhabits—the sprawl of Delhi, the virtual sphere of the digital commons, the rarefied climes of the global art world—its name mimes the recursive whorls of media that are both their platform as artists and their object of inquiry.

**RAQS’S MEMBERS WILL TELL YOU THAT** the art world’s peculiar fetish for collectivism hews to a misty-eyed vision of a storied past, that images of paving stones tossed and barricades stormed fail to capture what is at once more mundane *and* more insidious about collectivism’s contemporary forms and the reimagining of the commons they have instigated. On the one hand, media-driven collectivity may be as banal as wikis or the Facebook multitudes; on the other, the protocols enabling such social networks have a dark underbelly. As highlighted by recent reports about neo-Nazi social-networking sites, Republican-rump extremists are almost as tech savvy as Al Qaeda (the latter often pointed to by Raqs as an exemplar of headless decentralization). Or consider the ubiquitous practice of file sharing, which to some may be as activist or communal in spirit as redistributing GNU source code; to others, as creative as the artistic platform for the expression of remix culture; to others still, as actionable and divisive as peer-to-peer networking on Napster. Due to the uses to which such media are put, and to their *appearance* of openness and transparency, these examples raise a host of politico-ethical questions about authorship, access and apportionment, control and creativity—topics that speak to the radical transformation of the commons and of the public sphere. All of which is merely to scratch the surface of the



### III

A million ways to make things rough is better  
than one way to make things smooth.  
From each according to their generosity,  
to each according to their pleasure.



gargantuan legal implications underlying this transformation. Testing the limits of copyright, trademark, and patent law, initiatives such as Lessig's Creative Commons and the copyleft movement have brought widespread awareness to the debate surrounding the privatization of code and its ramifications for monopolizing and controlling information—platform and content alike.

If obliquely, Raqs takes a multilayered approach to this broad range of issues. First, a quick survey of Raqs's work suggests a withdrawal of the traditional commons, as telegraphed through a kind of fugitive iconography of shadows and blurs, things lost and found, blocked signals, secret agents, and inaccessible spaces. As if in response to the conditions of an age in which the individual is reduced to an arbiter of “lifestyle consensus”—is reduced, that is, to the status of consumer sovereign—Raqs populates its art with a host of phantoms, like wraiths scavenging what remains after the commons' plunder. There's the pile of empty sneakers in *Lost New Shoes*, 2005, garish trainers whose owners have gone missing—a paradoxically tidy summation of the geopolitical anomie of forced migration and collective dispossession. In the video and sound installation *A/S/L (Age/Sex/Location)*, 2003, female workers in Indian call centers serve as remote agents of distant communications, ventriloquizing and attempting to inhabit the cadence of spoken English. *Preface to a Ghost Story*, 2005, is a series of black-and-white vignettes that tell the tale of “an unknown citizen” who has leaped to his death, leaving behind a “make-do archive” for a “gathering of shadows.” And in *The Impostor in the Waiting Room*, 2004—an installation composed of light boxes, projections, sound, and a facsimile of an 1831 letter from reform-minded Indian nationalist Ram Mohan Roy, protesting the umpteenth denial of his French visa—the image of a waiting room, occupied by a figure in a bowler hat with his

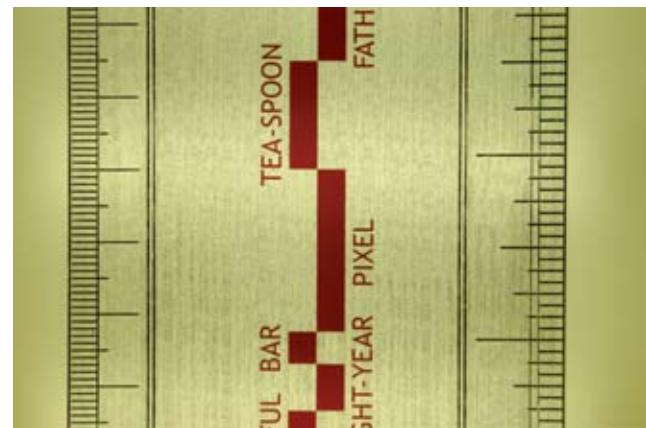
**Due to the uses to which digital media are put, and to their appearance of openness and transparency, they raise a host of politico-ethical questions about authorship, access and apportionment, control and creativity—topics that speak to the radical transformation of the commons and of the public sphere.**

back to the audience, suggests a latent encounter with modernity, legions eager to get a foot in the door.

All these works speak to a restive kind of presence, neither wholly there nor completely absent but trafficking in some uncharted in-between space. It's an aesthetic that contravenes the logic of transparency, immediacy, and accessibility conventional to the received wisdom on the commons; but it also implicitly suggests that such shade might provide cover under which to work, and to survive. Certainly Raqs's presentation is at odds with the occasionally militant personae projected by other artists' groups, some of which convey the impression that there is a self-possessed (to the point of heroic) agent behind their collective efforts. The group brooks no identification with such models, but it hardly romanticizes the conditions sponsoring its own subjects' liminality, either. Instead, works of this sort anticipate the dispersed and distributive quality of a second and linked aspect of Raqs's practice—namely, its overlap with the endeavors of Sarai. If Raqs's subjects initially seem orphic, even occult, in light of the urgency of the questions raised, it is Sarai's projects that reveal an approach to media where latency does indeed trump the mani-

fest and the declarative, and where the commons is as dispersed as it is shared. That is, if we were to characterize Raqs and Sarai's division of labor, we could say that what one thematizes, the other works to actualize. Raqs functions as the art-world agent of its members' media-based inquiries. It is alongside, through, and within Sarai that Raqs remakes the commons in the long shadows cast by media and technological elites.

**HOUSED IN THE BASEMENT** of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, the research institution where Raqs's clock is installed, Sarai is a nonprofit organization that describes itself as a “space for research, practice and conversation about the contemporary media and urban constellations.” It is directed by Sundaram and Vasudevan, the two scholars who founded the space with Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta. The relationship between Raqs and Sarai is philosophically as well as structurally inextricable: *Raqs* refers to questions rarely addressed; Sarai provides a range of actual and virtual spaces for collective reflection. These sites include the laboratory at the CSDS, which hosts students and visiting fellows from South Asia and abroad; the annual thematic readers on such topics as “The Public Domain” and “The Cities of Everyday Life,” which gather writings by both well-known and emerging thinkers; collaborations with other



media-based initiatives, such as the programs of Amsterdam's Waag Society; and—within the space of the commons—the user-generated content resulting from access to, and development of, free software.

Though Raqs coalesced well in advance of Sarai, describing the lead-up to the latter amounts to understanding what is “collective” about the former. *Sarai* refers to the roadhouse rest stops built during the Mughal period for caravans and travelers. It's a fitting moniker for a program studying the urban ecology of Delhi, conjuring not only the networked architecture that effectively brokers connections among disparate communities in the city and abroad but also the itinerant sensibility of digital media, with its nodes and links and hypertextual excursions. As students of documentary film and communications in the 1990s, Raqs's members were struck by what they describe as a pivotal moment when a “reconfiguration of media spaces” occurred throughout the city. In 1998, spontaneous street protests erupted in Delhi in response to the nuclear tests carried out by both India and Pakistan, but other metropolitan shifts of a decidedly subterranean nature were already afoot. As recalled in a 2006 conversation between Sarai and Mike Caloud initially published on Rhizome.org, “Public phone booths were transforming themselves into street corner cybercafés, independent filmmakers were beginning to organize themselves in forums, and a new open source and free software community made its mark in . . . Electronic Bulletin Boards.”

For Raqs and Sarai both, what's critical to this narrative is that chaos was the wellspring of creative ferment. A heady constellation of people, technics, places, and things came into being precisely because little regulation was in place. Something of a slapdash and improvisational sensibility animates Sarai's description of this moment, a function of what the group calls Delhi's “recycled economy”—the repurposing of media that keeps the old in circulation with the new and underscores the ways in which deprivation breeds creativity, often through acts of piracy. In other words, this is a history that flags the brute inequities surrounding access to media, just as they surround any other material resource, as

**A quick survey of Raqs's work suggests a withdrawal of the traditional commons, as telegraphed through a kind of fugitive iconography of shadows and blurs, things lost and found, blocked signals, secret agents, and inaccessible spaces.**

experienced on the ground in South Asia. No Napster narrative, this. Sarai's is not the oft-told tale of a thirteen-year-old in the American suburbs downloading Metallica on the sly. Perhaps the “digital divide” *seems* a foregone conclusion within Euro-American conversations about digital culture, but the question of this particular resource's haves and have-nots barely touches on conditions in India, however pervasive the images of Bangalore as the subcontinent's answer to Silicon Valley.

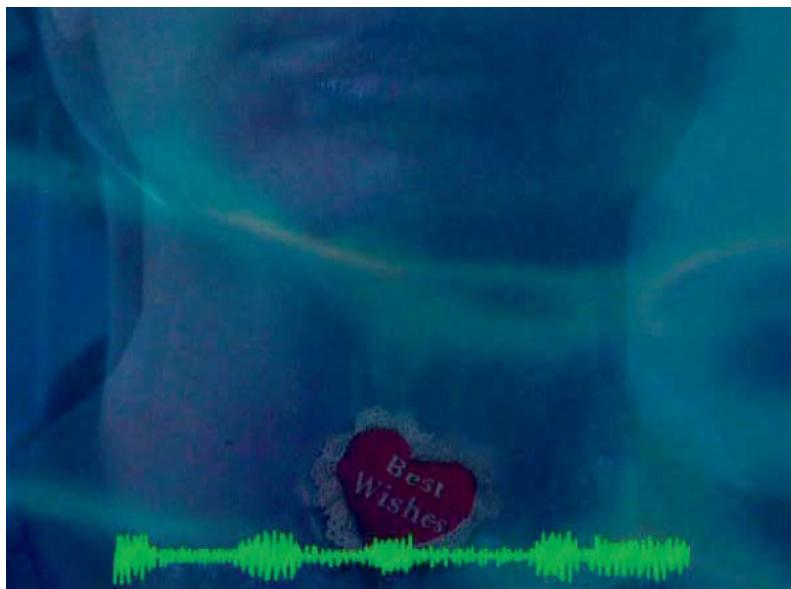
Sarai's history also confirms a wider shift in the rhetoric of the commons as mediated through cyberspace. In “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Hardin argued that what was once pastoral would turn tragic not only because of the scarcity of resources but also because of the abuse of freedom. It is, paradoxically, freedom that brings ruin to the commons, and Hardin's controversial response to this crisis involved such unsavory recommendations as population control. But

for some of his readers today, “freedom” is the prerogative to maximize one's gains relative to a shared resource; and control of that resource—most recently, through rabid claims to its privatization—is justified as the only way to stem this communal folly. (Think, for example, of the pernicious rationale behind privatizing water in developing countries and the imprimatur granted such efforts by the likes of the IMF and the World Bank.) Freedom, however, takes on a radically different valence when digital media, an infinitely renewable substance, is the resource in question. As Lessig details in his 2004 book *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity*, information not only “wants to be free,” per the gurus of the emerging digital age, but has been theorized by those gurus in relation to the utopian flights of a “post-scarcity” age. Free Software Foundation founder Richard Stallman, cited in *The Future of Ideas*, put it bluntly: Free

A gathering of shadows assesses the situation on the ground.



Bodies are fragile, easily broken.  
A scrap of paper, an explanation, sustains impact better.



means free “not in the sense of free beer, but free in the sense of free speech.” In the age of the consumer sovereign, where the public good is demonized as tantamount to a welfare state, one is tempted to update this formulation: Free means free not in the sense of a free market, but free in the sense of a free culture.

Lessig, whose groundbreaking work with Creative Commons provides the legal justification for the free-culture movement, sees the twinned futures of innovation and the Internet as resting precisely on access to code. Whether governments or markets take hold of this resource may be beside the point. The question is whether control, as articulated through current forms of copyright law, is in any way relevant to media whose recursive capabilities necessarily exceed such proprietary restrictions and whose cultures of collaboration and sharing are historically and structurally foundational to its technical development in the first place. In *The Future of Ideas*, Lessig shows how the evolution of Unix-type operating systems, such as Linux, the gold standard of the genre, facilitated some of the most important innovations in the history of the Internet, developments that occurred not because such source code was controlled but because it was free. Regulatory influence over the Internet, on the other hand, can only stand in the way of creativity, whether it’s technical improvements and the redistribution of new software or the making of new cultural forms. “It is an iron law of modern democracy,” Lessig writes, “that when you create a regulator, you create a target for influence, and when you create a target for influence, those in the best position to influence will train their efforts upon that target.”

As if channeling this particular logic, the various programs at Sarai use Linux in the creation of a digital commons, work that explores and archives conditions close to home while simultaneously forging connections with communities elsewhere. The project “Cybermohalla” (*mohalla* translates as “neighborhood”), 2001–, represents one of its most notable efforts to explore the secret corners and street-level semiotics of Delhi, its own kind of “media city,” to borrow one of Sarai’s preferred expressions. Partnering with the Delhi-based NGO Ankur: Society for Alternatives in Education, Sarai set up four media labs in slums where Ankur had established contacts, providing access to technology while supporting research and explorations about the city itself.

On the other side of the spectrum, the platform known as OPUS (Open Platform for Unlimited Signification), conceived by Raqs and implemented in collaboration with a number of Sarai fellows, facilitates creativity off-site in a more explicit thematization of the digital commons. OPUS “seeks to build a creative commons with a community of

Opposite page, from left: Raqs Media Collective, *A/S/L (Age/Sex/Location)* (detail), 2003, video, sound, images, text, and transcripts of a simulated chat-room conversation, dimensions variable. Raqs Media Collective, *Preface to a Ghost Story* (detail), 2005, ink and photographs on paper, dimensions variable. This page, from left: Raqs Media Collective, *The Impostor in the Waiting Room* (detail), 2004, projections, light boxes, drawings, bulletin board with narrative frames, framed letter, audio. Installation view, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York. Raqs Media Collective, *OPUS (Open Platform for Unlimited Signification)*, 2002–, screenshot.

media practitioners, artists, authors and the public from all over the world,” its mission statement reads. “Here people can present their own work and make it open for transformation, besides intervening and transforming the work of others by bringing in new materials, practices and insights.” OPUS, in other words, makes the work of art itself a kind of commons, with “the source(code) . . . in this case the video, image, sound or text . . . free to use, to edit and to redistribute.”

One is struck by the tenor of this language, at once expansive and utopian, in light of OPUS’s debut: The program launched at Documenta 11, arguably among the most prestigious of international exhibitions. It was around this time as well that the rhetoric of globalization had begun to crystallize in curatorial circles, and Bagchi, Narula, and Sengupta had increasingly assumed the de facto status of ambassadors of “contemporary Indian art.” There is, to say the least, something ridiculously tokenizing in the assumption that one group of artists might represent a wildly heterogeneous demographic of more than one billion people. But reducing Raqs to the figures of contemporary Indian art also misreads the very notion of collectivism and the commons as internalized within the group’s history and practice.

To the point: In spite of the buzz around “new genres” and the provisional real estate accorded “new media” in museums and galleries, OPUS is not the kind of work that frequently turns up in the market-driven spheres of the conventional art world. As an open-ended platform, theoretically authored by legions of online users, one could say that it’s not really a “work” at all, at least not by the usual proprietary standards assumed in both collecting and exhibiting works of art. The kind of peculiar and productive friction created by the interaction of OPUS, an open source for the anonymous commons, and Documenta, a historically exclusive collection of authors and insiders, seems critical to Raqs’s project. In short, OPUS was effectively launched *between* two distinct spheres of cultural production: one a virtual platform of the free-culture movement, the other the global art elite. Straddling these worlds—at once dramatizing their differences while shoring up their potential convergence—may well be the point of the exercise. To be a collective in the age of the consumer sovereign, after all, means gaming the spaces left in the commons’ wake. □

PAMELA M. LEE IS A PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

