

**Nemo/ No-man/ Nomad:
Collegial Reflections on the Raqs Media Collective**

Ranjit Hoskote

The character and practice of Raqs Media Collective mark a radical departure from the norms of mainstream contemporary Indian art, which is segregated by medium and style, and dominated by conventionally trained visual artists committed to the individual as unit of productive endeavour. By contrast with these officially designated artists, so to speak, Raqs is a versatile troika that combines, in the person of its three members, the various roles of media practitioner, filmmaker, writer and cultural organiser. Active in the areas of documentary filmmaking, photography and new-media art, Raqs has also formulated critical accounts of the virtual-space and urban-culture environments in which it works. Raqs has avoided the twin perils that attend the environment in which it conducts its practice, steering with deliberation between the specialist discourses of technocracy and high art.

Unlike the technocrats who extol cybernetics as a *deus ex machina* that will resolve all the problems and asymmetries of society, Raqs brings a politically nuanced perspective to bear on the relationship between the Net and material society, especially in India, where the conditions of postcoloniality and globalisation contribute to an ongoing crisis of entitlement and distribution. Opposing the alienation of the community from technology, Raqs warns against the creation of new elite and subaltern classes based on differential access to internet resources. Utopian as Raqs's aims may seem, these are vehiculated through an admirable pragmatism.

In collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, Raqs has established Sarai: The New Media Initiative (www.sarai.net). One of its major projects, the Cybermohalla, involves the Sarai team in an ongoing process of mutual education, online and offline, with young adults in a Delhi shantytown. Pursuing its ideal of a free-software culture, Raqs has initiated Opus (An Open Platform for Unlimited Signification), an online space where people can access and redistribute source images and texts, in creative violation of the copyright principle.

Raqs skilfully negotiates a trajectory through the institutionalised art world, weaving in and out of the realm of galleries, studios, museums and auction houses. Subscribing to and unsubscribing from this realm at will, it leaves a trail of bafflement behind it. The Collective's grasp of social and political realities makes the work of many painters and sculptors who appropriate political issues look precious and effete; its productions, which are developed and tested in semiotic situations remote from the white cube of the gallery, bring a gravity to bear on such white cubes when introduced into them. And even when their works are phrased as compositions and presented within an art-world context, there is enough of a quotient of otherness and elsewhere-ness that sets them apart.

By reason of their training and organisational activity, the members of Raqs have a critical and philosophically informed interest in modes of representation, in strategies of framing, showing and telling. The intellectual preparation necessary for phrasing and

addressing such questions is unusual among conventionally trained visual artists in India, who often remain preoccupied with questions cast in the played-out discourse of style and content, or are constrained by the symbolic and commercial economies within which they have been socialised to perform, to the neglect of conceptual problems. As against this, Raqs strongly articulates the relationship of the artistic imagination to political consciousness, the intersection between the conceptions of pleasure and justice.

Indeed, Raqs's collective form posits a fundamental challenge to the Romantic image of the artist as solitary genius, who fights off influences and collaborations to shape his unique style: an ideal that is still considerably influential in contemporary Indian art, however much it may be denied or diluted. In the long term, Raqs's protean and interdisciplinary approach – its freedom from a singularity of chosen material, style, concept or self-definition – will have the effect of dismantling the primacy of the self-contained art-work, and validating collegial, participatory and post-media art-making strategies.

*

Raqs Media Collective takes, as one of its preferred roles, that of the double agent operating between the domains of the real and the fictive, the legal and the proscribed. As such, Raqs works in that intermediate zone between the protocols of the legally permissible as laid down by nation-states and corporations, and the improvisations through which individuals enact the degrees of freedom that could release them from their predicaments. This is a zone whose inhabitants change shape and texture, moult the phrases used to describe them in official reports and clothe themselves periodically in new skins. And so they escape detection by the colour-blind vigilance squads of authority, the ecclesiarchs and demagogues who would divide the world by appeal to the spurious clarity of bichromatic vision.

It is significant that Raqs responds with empathy to figures whose selfhood is described between vulnerability and vigilance: the artisan whose life is a continuity of mind, senses and tools, driven to the rimlands by large-scale transformations of the economy; the pilot-navigator who cannot afford to fall asleep at the wheel while traversing the uncharted routes of a hazardous world; the marginal denizen of the city, survivor of sprawl and target of regulatory forces, who must forge his life through temporary connections and staked-out territories, depending on the portability of skill and instinct rather than the stable investments of property and policy.

The city is invariably the site of Raqs activity: the city that is at once a restrictive plan marked over terrain as a grid, a web of possibilities that ramify and exponentiate in every direction, and an array of booby-trapped avenues and escape routes charted through bylanes. Site, conduit, cul-de-sac, roundabout, settlement: these signposts of community are also forms of conveyance, and they may be found as much in the physical city as in the virtual territory of the internet. To Raqs, the city is not defined narrowly by topographical details, traffic rules and development regulations; rather, in the praxis of Raqs, the city is a space formed by intersubjective relationships, by discoveries made in conversation, by the surprises of encounter.

This is why Raqs does not regard locality as a physical constraint or an ideological absolute for the legislation of identity. Rather, it views locality as a platform from which the world may be explored: a base from which expeditions can be launched at any of a range of scales, from the lanes of a Delhi shantytown through the borderlands of resistance discourse in Europe to virtual space. And yet, I would not ascribe the nomad position unquestioningly, without certain qualifications and provisos, to Raqs; to do so would be to do their work an injustice.

In the traditional account, the nomad was a person of no fixed address, the rhythms of whose life varied with the availability of pasturage or food supply. Mobility was a constraint that prevented him from belonging. Under this rubric of nomadism, we could also place the epic migrations of peoples across continents, in search of new pasturelands and sources of water, and the migrations of communities in search of trade, patronage or security from invasion. Stories and images migrated with their bearers. The nomadic condition does not necessarily represent choice: you do not embrace it, it embraces you. Such movements continue today, as capital flows across the globe and labour follows it; as illegal migrants jump checkpoints and ecological refugees test the breaches in sealed borders.

By the nomad position, here, I would signify a position based on mobility as a freedom from constraint, from the methods of confinement and conformity that nation-states, academies and other orthodoxies practise. Such a position signifies choice: it is (following Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion) a position of resistance, deliberately adopted and set over against the static and the statist, the State's modes of dominating the world, or of managing reality. And yet, crucially, in my reading of Raqs, this nomad position does not result in a manic placelessness; instead, it is braced by a commitment to particular spaces and times, corridors of location that must be hacked through the massifs of the metropolitan establishment, edges whose jaggedness is forever under threat of being smoothed out by civic expansion. After all, even the nomads of the traditional account followed their annual circuits of wandering, not moving entirely away from the fixed points of their mobile life, but returning to replenish themselves at the ancestral sources of water at the end of the steppe.

In relation to art, specifically, the nomad position can be elaborated in terms of its cultural and political implications. Conceptually, it embodies the critical and adversarial; formally, it subverts the linearities and consistencies of presence, duration, medium, spatialisation and address, distributing these beyond the control of the expressive and discursive venues designated for art-production and -circulation. To accomplish this, as I have argued elsewhere, artists, critics and curators in the nomad position would launch tactical enterprises, operating purposively in the minor keys of making rather than the major keys of Art, embrace the improvisational and transitive. To phrase the situation in that archetypal language of replenishment-through-migrancy, Urdu: the *habitus* of the nomad lies somewhere between *zameen* and *khwab*. This continuous negotiation between territory and dream, in which both terms are in a condition of play and exchange, is the essence of the nomad aesthetic as I have briefly delineated it here. It certainly lies at the heart of the Raqs approach.

*

Whereabouts? is a question frequently asked in the works of Raqs. The coordinates of latitude and longitude recur, both as a definitive measure of belonging and as a trope for imaginative gestures of self-extension, in their inter-media installations. So, too, does the figure of the border-crosser who makes guerrilla interventions in the fabric of normality: s/he speaks in several tongues, deploys a succession of tactically chosen masks, and vanishes as quickly as s/he appeared, having registered his/her presence in the form of labels pasted on various everyday objects, whether dustbin or lamp-post or wall.

Why do I think of Captain Nemo when I think of Raqs? Perhaps it is because Raqs's projects turn on such key questions as: Who can pass through sealed borders without the right papers? Who can leave padlocked rooms by walking through mirrors? Who can slip in and out of difficult situations by using the disguise of normality? I think of Nemo: not Everyman, but his shadow double, No-man.

I do not contribute Nemo to this discourse gratuitously. Jules Verne is remembered by his readers for the astounding anticipations that he made in the 19th century – sometimes nearly to the exact latitude and longitude – of the scientific and technological advances of the 20th. But few are aware that he was also politically ahead of his time, in commenting on colonial oppression and the reactions it would generate; Verne phrased his commentary in visionary style, as political prophecy. The technological genius and enigmatic avenger Captain Nemo, perhaps Verne's best-known character, dominates *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870); we may have missed the clues to his identity in that novel, but he is revealed to be the Indian prince Dakkar in *The Mysterious Island* (1874-95), a leader and survivor of the Great Uprising of 1857. A thinly disguised version of Nana Sahib, also a figure to whom Verne dedicated some of his fiction, Nemo is a man of encyclopaedic interests in the sciences and the arts; a person of cultivation, yet also motivated to seek justice against the colonial oppressor.

In his ideology and methods, Nemo/Nana anticipates the kind of free-ranging international revolutionist, to invoke that delicious 19th-century term, who is so much a feature of our present. No-man and nomad, he strikes oppressor states at will, has no base citadel that may be surrounded or subjected to retaliatory strikes; he is concealed in the vastness of a world mapped by satellite photography, yet where a man may vanish without trace in the heart of a metropolis or on a snow-capped ridge. Writing in the epoch that began with Eiffel and would culminate with Tatlin, Verne was culturally predisposed to take the engineer for his hero: the engineer as revolutionary and redeemer, who would found a new order of social being based on freedom and justice. The members of the Raqs Media Collective have undergone a classic radicalisation experience in their student years: they have been on the Left, and have gone through it to emerge, not disillusioned, but *unillusioned*. They would not subscribe to the binary of utopia/terror that Nemo/Nana symbolises. And yet, they do not succumb to the corrosion of cynicism; as Nemo figures, they carry with them the impulses of unmasking the dominant discourse, preserving the surprise vital to acts of resistance, and their sense of solidarity with those who suffer injustice.

*

Raqs is, as I have observed earlier, collegial in its operations. Its members invite others to participate in the improvisational platforms or social projects that they initiate; but they neither constrain themselves within a domineering *auteur-dirigiste* role, nor do they lock themselves into a single way of making art or intervening in the politics of everyday life. If they regard the world as an anthology, and base a number of their interventions on this principle, it is not from an encyclopaedist's ambition to contain the whole of human knowledge in a volume – but rather, as a homage to the acts of sign-making and meaning-making, which they cherish as a record of the poetics by which human beings mark their presence, activity and the small histories of insight that add up to a larger landscape of endeavour. Thus, Raqs prizes the elliptical and the epigrammatic, the ephemeral and the oblique, the asides of daily life: for all these there is space in the archival consciousness that underpins the workings of Raqs. Like the *alaya-vijnana* of Yogachara Buddhist thought, this is the treasure-house of images, impulses and potentialities from which Raqs operates.

And yet, secrecy plays as important a role as sociality does, in the workings of Raqs. I would suggest that the emphasis on secrecy, passage by impersonation, versatility of form, and the multiple readabilities of the signal – which are central motifs in the work of Raqs – may be viewed under two different aspects. At one level, these are the gestures by which their chosen figures of reference, the refugee and the illegal migrant and the marginal artisan, conduct the mobilities of living. At another level, these gestures also speak, do they not, of privacies encoded into the work of art as traces of autobiography?

As a figure or trope, the nomad signifies the transgressive and emancipatory gesture. The nomad position is a threat to established order, since it rejects borders, passports, the claims of nations, the ordinances of states and the doctrines of academies. It shifts base constantly; the zones it occupies are transient. This, precisely, produces an ambivalence, so far as the radical politics of the collective good is concerned. To be a nomad is to be free of an audience; an art-work that carries its own special charge will invent its own public as it goes along. To this extent, we must accept that the transgressive and emancipatory gesture of nomadism could involve the assertion of idiosyncrasy and solitude, and the corresponding death of those values of community and locality that are so uncritically paraded as the supreme imperatives of any 'relevant' art form. Let us not be so carried away by our political preoccupations as to demand, of the nomad, an unvarying ethic of sociality even at the cost of his or her aesthetic obsessions.

By this intriguing duality between the nomad as public interventionist and the nomad as explorer of private realities, therefore, the same gestures of solidarity that Raqs enacts may also signify an identification with the cryptic, the hermetic, the not-easily-shared, the not-publicly-revealed. I would suggest that Raqs's emphasis on such paradox, such doubleness in its textual and installation practices may be read as an expression of the freedom not to belong to a constituted whole; it underscores the artistic liberty to dissent even from a dissident perspective, if necessary, and to remain aloof of allegiance to the momentary canons of political correctness. The impulse towards coding and encryption

in Raqs's art is, at its deepest level, an anarchist insistence on retaining the autonomy of a republic of three; and an affirmation of the belief that it is often our most hidden private selves that impart an animating energy to our public engagements. This is not the insecure gesture of the closed circle that implodes upon itself. It is, in actuality, the subtle announcement of the primacy of that archetypal inner circle from which all ripple effects must emanate. By reason of its accomplished balance of interiority and sociality, code and declarative, the work of the Raqs Media Collective compels our respect and admiration.

Notes:

This essay incorporates material from two previous texts that I have written:

Ranjit Hoskote, 'The Nomad Position' in *Art India* Vol. 7 Issue 4 (October-December 2002), p. 28;

Ranjit Hoskote, 'The Raqs Media Collective' in *Art Asia Pacific* Issue 37 (January-March 2003), p. 52.

The references to Captain Nemo's Indian identity may be found in Jules Verne, *The Mysterious Island* (trans. Jordan Stump; New York: The Modern Library, 2001).

(October 2004)