

## Raqs Media Collective: casebook

Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta (the collective), with Philip Monk, curator and writer.

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Surjection was the name of an exhibition devised by the Raqs Collective of New Delhi and held at the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto in 2011. The title, from mathematical terminology, whereby arguments as input expressions are related or mapped to output expressions (or images), is illusive in this context. More than a catalogue for the show, this substantial publication extends the work of this group of artists beyond the time and place of the event and provides clues to the use of the math term. A retrospective of over a decade of production is exhibited within the covers of the book along with the new installations made for the Gallery space itself.

But these documented artefacts are the starting point for conversations and the story-telling implicit not only within much contemporary art practice, but here pursued initially from within the deep cultures of the sub-continent. The caravanserai being the location and nomadic context for cultural transmission, the Mahabharata the Sanscrit epic, (often cited by hypertextual and new media researchers), within which ideas of recension are expressed, linking stories and story-tellers across time. From

earlier output expression, viewed by the Collective with scepticism and imagination, comes fresh input linked like mathematics with elegance, confidence and certainty.

Raqs – the term comes from the whirling dances of Asia – regard other artists, researchers and writers as part of the complex interchange of their ideas and practice. Selecting strands from the international army of practitioners, the Collective have curated artists into specific institutions, festivals and biennales. In Bolzano, the pan-European Biennial in 2008 occupied an abandoned aluminium factory; their rhetoric asked, 'What work must memory be put to in order to ensure that we erect not memorials that close the roads to further enquiry, but signposts to ask for more journeys to be undertaken?'

From work which filled the concrete shell of this residue of an instance of industrial gambling, to discrete inkjet prints, whilst physical scale of the art object is not of significance, the human dimension is: 'The Mathematics of Anacoustic Reason' responds to a curatorial invitation to respond to the concept, Out of the Equation – Roads to Reality. Using an equation with mathematical terms defined, the net effect of the disquiet of the multitude can be arrived at in relation to the voice of authority, or put more personally, being located, 'not knowing that you are unable to listen'.

A distinguished panel of international writers contribute to the centre section of the book, (elegantly designed using a coloured paper stock). 'The Librarian's Lucid Dream - From Decomposition', variously discusses topics of modernity, performative fictions, Islamic aesthetics, illustration, interpretation, commodification, abstractionism, museology, post-Marxist theory, pedagogies, the poetic image, the diary, and friendship, in relation to the Collective's and more generally, the

social practice of artists.

An extended discussion by the three members of the Collective with a frequent curatorial collaborator, Hans Ulrich Obrist, provides a series of anecdotes and discussion in relaxed mode as relief from the more demanding but shorter polemical pieces. Where individual artists are able to make their way, to show work often with the help of gallerists, the returns are often scant in terms of resources, recognition and access to an audience; too often they become the financial securities of the rich, collectors guided by the national collections. The Raqs Collective have consolidated individual effort to be able to engage with these contradictions across an international range of cultures and countries. They have consistently thrown into question the basis of their practice in the face of the many questions emergent from the everyday, the mythical and the historical. The Casebook surveys the past interventions as they continue into future decades.

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