

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

Weaving emotions with time

A study of works by Indian Contemporary Artist Collective: Raqs Media Collective

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ABSTRACT:

My paper aims to explore the central idea of the ways the genre of self-portraiture branches out to broader practice of autobiographical visual making. The challenge of creating their own likeness has proved irresistible to the artists . Self-portraits at various levels project a kind of self-confession/ comedy as well as unease in its revelation. Through this paper I aim to explore the innovation in the artistic representation. The parameters that define the selection of the medium chosen by the artist is important to my research. My paper examines the works by Raqs Media Collective and the ways they have employed for self-depiction and the idea of self meandering between poetic lingual and visual imageries and how they have explored this genre by creating deeply revealing works about their experiences and life. This paper is explanatory on the works by Contemporary Artists of Delhi NCR, as to how they are exploring the concept of their role-behavior as an active art practitioner through their multimedia works.

KEYWORDS: Visual Art, Contemporary Art, Indian Contemporary Artist, Self-Portraiture, Raqs Media Collective, Installation, Documentary.

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INTRODUCTION

'Art is a kind of matrix that goes through all kinds of territories.'

Raqs Media Collective was formed in 1992, during the college days of the trio- Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, while they were studying together in a film school. They were interested in urban space and architecture and how cities get formed.

Their main concentration lies in the contemporary practices, and outside a porous boundary is how to look at the practice. Most of their work engages in time and temporality, rhythms and measures.

Together, the trio, Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta speak a language of the strength of the 'collective play', which is often spontaneous and undirected playful, at the same time, politically driven in purpose. The practice is based upon the organisation of triangulation. Their work vocabulary engages in the essence of triangulation between rationale, instinct, fictitious and mythical, creating a 'scaffold of propositions'. The collective uses a diverse range of materials including drawings, videos, animations, sculpture, image, text, reading, archives, dialogues, amongst many more.

Around 1998-2000, they stop doing everything for two years because at that particular time they thought there was much turbulence in the city things were changing. With a realisation, that they should take a break, and rethink of what they were doing, they stopped to working for a year and a half and conceptualised the making of a space called 'The Sarai', that was sustained interdisciplinary research space.

They created a kind of an interdisciplinary process in which they look at the domain of contemporary art as a form of knowledge, the way it thinks the world today and kind of challenges that it poses to us in the future way of making culture itself.

'Kinetic Contemplation' as a term is significant to the working of Raqs. It refers to a state when the whirling dervishes' whirl' get into an ecstatic trans kind of mental state/condition, that is called Raqs. Monica Narula says, *the basic initiator/ idea for their work is the fact that thought and practice are not separate. When one is making, one does not stop thinking, and when one is thinking, one does not stop making.* if one makes something does not mean one cannot talk about it, or should have to actively stop thinking process that is at the heart of making and unmaking.

'Raqs', the term means an increase of awareness and conscious achieved by whirling, revolving, and present in a state of revolution in several languages. The Collective taking the meaning forward of 'Raqs', works around the aspect of 'kinetic contemplation' in order to make a restless and spirited entanglement with space and time. Raqs practices across several forms of media, including creating art, performances, writing, curation, thereby carving a position at the juncture of contemporary art, philosophical theory, and historical investigation.

A SELF PORTRAIT:

As a response to the question of who is RAQS? as published in the book: 'It's possible because it's possible', they describe themselves as 'a being with six eyes, six hands, six feet, one vagina, two pair of testicles, three tongues and half of mind to get behind queries like this to ask whether, instead of having to offer the confession, Raqs can simply be rarely asked questions.'

The name itself suggests that the very process in which they work instead of asking the Frequently Asked Questions or the FAQS, their name suggests a continuous engagement and a fresh enquiry through Rarely Asked Questions, or RAQS.

Drawing photography, sculpture filmmaking writing projection public intervention lecture-performances and collaborations all come before us. They are layered upon one another, cutting against each other. And all expertly composed and presented offering answers to questions: what, how, and why? Where the products or the artworks are only the articulation of this process of enquiry.

Raqs can be hence described as artist, media practitioners, editors, researchers, curators, and catalyst of cultural processes.

Raqs Media Collective studies its self-proclaimed necessity of the concept of 'kinetic contemplation' to create a route that is restless in its methods and challenging in its processes.

Raqs communicates a thoroughly settled rapport with 'time' as a concept, and all its tenses through expectation, speculation, entanglement and excavation.

Conjuring up intellectual and physical intensity figures, their work re-constructs opinion fields and challenges that everyone considers being taken for granted, once- again.

Raqs has exhibited widely, including the prestigious Documenta at Germany, Liverpool, Istanbul, Taipei, Sydney, Venice, Shanghai, and Sao Paulo Biennales. Their solo exhibits and projects include Still More World at Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha (2019); Pamphilos at Fast Forward Festival 6, Athens (2019); Everything Else is Ordinary at K21 Museum for 21st Century Art, Dusseldorf (2018); Twilight Language at Manchester Art Gallery (2017-2018); 2015: If It's Possible, It's Possible, MUAC, Mexico City and Untimely Calendar at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi (2014-2015).

Exhibitions curated by Collective include Yokohama Triennale (2020), In The Open or in Stealth 2018-19- MACBA, Barcelona; Why Not Ask Again - The Shanghai Biennale 2016-2017); INSERT2014 at New Delhi, The Rest of Now & Scenarios at the Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008.

Raqs Media Collective continues to be based in New Delhi, constantly connecting a strong, restless contemporary idea of what it means to set claim to the globe from the streets of the city of New Delhi. At the same time, they articulate a closely lived relationship with mythologies and histories of different provenances. Raqs looks at it as an opportunity for the possible conversation that personifies an inconsistency towards modernism and a critique of the functions of property and power.

In the introductory chapter titled 'Emotional Cartography Technologies of the Self', Christian Nold talks about technologies of identification take into account the ability of a person to enact different iterations of the self... Hyperlinking of aspects of being- when expanding and cross referencing matrix of acts, attributes and attitudes that constitutes the database of a person's 'becoming' over time. He also talks about bio mapping as a vision of the future social tools that can empower us to move away from the individual brain towards communal mind hacks and radical rethinking of the self.

Under the chapter titled as 'Machines made to measure: On the technology of identity and the manufacture of difference' Raqs takes the reference of The Identity of Ekalavya then is something that emerges from the relationship of two kinds of enactment of the selfhood.

As a part of the exhibition titled as 'Creating Ourselves The Self in Art: Works from the ISelf Collection' selection: 'Self-portrait as the Billy Goat' held between 27 April to 20 August 2017 at the Whitechapel Gallery, Whitechapel High Street, London, the Collective presented a work titled as the 'Escapement'. The the show brought together the psychological, physical as well as the imaginary self-portraits by the leading International artists of the world. The collection focused on the human condition and also on identity and the self. The collection was collected by Maris Sukkah and her husband

Malek. The works selected were about how artists looked at their own bodies, and self-reflections, that examined in developing the sense of personal identity and the human nature (in relation to others, through relationships and through dialogues) other questions to the self.

As a part of the show the artists were essentially looking at the subject of self as complex and based on many things like our thoughts, emotions and feelings sometimes even the limits of our own body. The show looked at very existential questions also that perhaps conception of the self in the process. The show also focuses on how a sense of identity is being shifted and is also being constructed.

While elaborating on the portraits as a part of the show, the curator of the show Emily Butler defined how the show focused on portraits as a moment of encounter between two people a moment of the relationship of love perhaps. What happens to the dynamic that captured in a moment and then is presented on a wall.

The show makes an attempt to encourage the viewers to reflect on the notion of the self by examining the physical and the relevant material cohesion of the bodies and the sculptures. The show's works offer a fragmented, constructed and instinctive perspective where bodies intersect with nonliving objects and a possibility of think beyond the selfhood and the shifting concepts of selfhood.

ESCAPEMENT

The work presented by Raqs, as a part of the show was metaphorical and abstract in representation.



Escapement, 2009, installation with 24 Clocks, 3 reverse clocks, 4 video screens, sound track. *Source:Asia Art Archive*



27 clocks (high gloss aluminium with LED lights), four flat-screen monitors, video and audio looped

Escapement work takes reference from horology or the scientific study of time and the practice of constructing timepieces.

The work indicates a working of powered / analogue format watches and wall- clocks which administrate the systematic and consistent motion of hands of the clock, through a 'catch and release' mechanism that both releases and confines the handles that lead to the movement of the hands for hours, minutes and seconds in the timepieces.

The installation refers to the clockwork, emotions, topography, imaginary, and time belts.

Each timepiece has face with twelve words that designate twelve sentiments/ emotions or situation of presence, where we would normally assume the 60 minutes/ an hour to be.

The emotions or the situations include:

- *Anxiety* in-place of hour 1
- *Duty* in-place of hour 2
- *Guilt* in-place of hour 3
- *Indifference* in-place of hour 4
- *Awe* in-place of hour 5
- *Fatigue* in-place of hour 6
- *Nostalgia* in-place of hour 7
- *Ecstasy* in-place of hour 8
- *Fear* in-place of hour 9

- *Panic* in-place of hour 10
- *Remorse* in-place of hour 11 and
- *Epiphany* in-place of hour 12

When it's a fifteen-minutes past twelfth hour, the clocks would read "*guilt past epiphany*". While the New York clock might show '*remorse-past-guilt*', the Baghdad will show '*ecstasy-past-anxiety*' at the same moment.

One is able to read the various emotional cartographies of the world.

The words on the timepieces are written in different languages, Hindi, Arabic, and English and so on. The Collective generated them in various languages, with an attempt to generate a conversation about 'what happens when you slip between languages'. Distinctions are rendered in the middle of linguistic traditions, cultures and histories. While all the individuals feel a similar way, they talk it them in different ways. Everyone flows between languages. Most of their artwork is a process to register 'what happens and what is achieved in the translation'.

The Twenty-four clocks out of the twenty-seven clocks depict the time of cities: Seattle, Mexico City, New York, Mogadishu, Baghdad, Grozny, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Dakar, Kabul, Karachi, Delhi, Lagos, Liverpool, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Brussels, Hanoi, Bangkok, Amsterdam, Ramallah, Beijing, Sydney.

While, the other three clocks are labelled to three imaginary cities – Babel, Shangrila and Macondo – and they run backwards nearly, reflecting the real-time.

The screens as installed as a part of the work display the face of an androgynous, ageless person, moving through and between the hours, listening to the heartbeats and other recurring and arrhythmic sounds.

The works are created with an attempt to create forms that arise out of tensions between forms.

CONCLUSION:

Forms that arise when a person understands and look at the multiplicity and undulation of the horizon, the ragged limits and the tensions that are very surface and close to an individual. At the same time, have an idea of flight and distance. The take-off points always remain the conceptual and the

philosophical grounds. This piece talks about contemporary times, how one thinks about time, about geography, about how one can experience the state of being human across geography.

The entire installation comprises of 27 clocks allocated to a city the handset to their corresponding time zones, nevertheless, the timepieces denote emotion rather than the time as if each city was on a Nietzschean thought process., destined to an immortal return of extreme feeling.

The fictional cities serve as both cultural metaphor and failed utopian action but their inclusion here appears to symbolic like smart signals towards a hidden meaning.

Escapement in all is an attempt to pass a commentary on the very contemporary form of existential crisis.

The works are a reminder of how art becomes a cathartic experience, a letting go of pent-up emotions, and also the way the self-portraiture is used in reference to the new techniques.

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