

“The situation is tense, but under control”

A conversation between Cornelia Sollfrank and two members of the Raqs Media Collective, Delhi. The conversation took place at the opening of Documenta11 in Kassel where the collective presented their work, and was continued subsequently through e-mail.

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C.S.: What does RAQS mean?

RMC(Shuddhabrata Sengupta): It is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and means the state that “whirling dervishes” enter into when they whirl. It is also a word used for dance. Although we are also striving for a state of ecstasy, like the dervishes, we are completely un-mystical! At the same time, Raqs could be an acronym, standing for “rarely asked questions”...! (as opposed to “frequently asked questions”, or Faqs.)

C.S.: What is your professional background?

RMC(S.S.): The three of us met in film school, at the Mass Communication Research Centre in the Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi about 11 years ago. We were students together there. Once we graduated we decided together not to enter the dominant media mainstream, but try to work on our own. This was the birth of our media collective.

C.S.: What kind of work did you have in mind when you started?

RMC(S.S.): Our initial idea was to be independent film makers, and try to work within a relatively autonomous cultural space. That is also what we did for many years. But this space got more and more difficult to work in. We got tired of writing proposals for films that never happened.

C.S.: In what way were you organized in the beginning. Did you have an infrastructure like space, equipment, etc.?

RMC(S.S.): No, we didn’t have anything. And very often we worked as assistants, like when we were hired together as a unit. Monica Narula as cinematographer, and Jeebesh Bagchi, the third member of the collective, and myself doing research, or working as assistant directors. That was the way how we could make a little money, and do smaller independent projects. Sometimes we worked for Television, if they accepted our proposals. But we realized very quickly that dominant mainstream media was not a space where we could do independent

work in. So we started to imagine an ideal space, a space for research, for interdisciplinary work, where people like us could work.

And for two years we only worked on building the proposal for this. We had a partnership with De Waag (Society for Old and New Media) in Amsterdam, and both, De Waag and us also got funds to start an exchange program.

C.S.: What is the source for the funding?

RMC(S.S.): It was the Dutch government's development aid funding. You know, you can get development aid funding and do interesting things with it. You don't have to waste it, what unfortunately can be the standard. Later we also got funding from the Daniel Langlois Foundation for the Media Lab and the Interface Zone at Sarai, from the Rockefeller Foundation for some of the research programmes, and from Hivos for aspects of our Outreach programme.

C.S.: How did you make the connection to De Waag, because this is already a big step to make from Delhi to Amsterdam?

RMC(S.S.): That is one of the interesting things about the internet. Even if you are based in Delhi, you can listen to a lot of interesting conversations, and make connections to people and initiatives you find interesting.

C.S.: But that assumes that you were already hooked up to a certain international scene of independent media workers.

RMC(S.S.): Well, initially we had one computer, which 17 people shared in a flat. That was how we started to work. Internet connectivity was very low, computers were very expensive, we didn't have money. Still, it was our only way out into the world. We wanted to find out what was going on, what people were thinking, and what happened in this new cultural space. Then we began conversations with Ravi Sundaram and Ravi Vasudevan who are both media theorists, Ravi Sundaram was working on pirate culture, and we all started to exchange ideas about our 'ideal space'.

C.S.: Is Sundaram also based in Delhi?

RMC(S.S.): Yes, he is scholar at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) (1), and now we are a program of that center, which is an independent research institution. Ravi Sundaram knew people like Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens who are active in Nettime, and were part of the critical new media scene in Amsterdam.

What also happened in 1998 there were nuclear tests in India. And that energized a nascent peace movement. A lot of people began gathering regularly in anti nuclear demonstrations in Delhi. It was the beginning of a different political culture which was not part of the mainstream, completely spontaneous in some ways. The Next5Minutes conference in Amsterdam happened the same year. And Ravi Sundarum suggested that one of us should go there, and make a presentation about the state of new media culture in India, particularly with reference to the new political sensibility that had occurred in the wake of the nuclear tests.

C.S.: What do you mean when you talk about 'new media'?

RMC(S.S.): From the very beginning, it was clear that new media to us meant new ways of thinking about media, and allowed combinations of 'old and new media', print, internet, film. And it was at n5M that we started talking seriously with De Waag.

C.S.: What is the relation between RAQS and Sarai?

RMC(S.S.): Well, the three of us, RAQS Media Collective, are co-initiators of the Sarai programme, along with Ravi Sundaram and Ravi Vasudevan at CSDS. We, Raqs Media Collective, continue to maintain our identity, and we work as a media collective, based at Sarai. Now, Sarai consists of about 30 people who work there, about 20-25 independent researchers and practitioners supported by Sarai, then there are visitors, we have residency programs. For instance, Silvan Zurbreugg and Bauke Freiburg, two students from Zurich and Amsterdam, who have been very active in collaborating with us and the media lab team at Sarai. They were in residency at Sarai for 6 months recently to help with the OPUS project. And they are part of our team at Documenta, as is Pankaj Kaushal, from Sarai, who worked with Silvan on the coding for Opus.

C.S.: The work you contribute to Documenta11 consists of different parts. Could you please describe the various parts in short, and say how they correlate?

RMC (Monica Narula): There are two primary parts: One is within the space of Documenta, and one is an online application. The latter is a place for sharing cultural material. People can put up their work, name the source or the author, and keep the authorship if it's theirs, but everybody can download, interpret, use, modify, and load up again the material. The project comes from the idea of Free Software, and is based on the same principles. We want to create a digital commons, and try to find out if people are willing to share work in this area.

C.S.: What is the name of this application?

RMC(M.N.): It is called OPUS, we just mentioned it earlier. And it is a kind of a contrary concept to what we explore in our installation here in Documenta hall. This installation is about the question how space is constructed, and how masterplans determine what you can do within an urban space. The construction of barriers within city movement, the notion of people as encroachers and trespassers, how everyday life has to negotiate these terminology. An important part of the installation is a text element which is on screen. We edited this material over time from laws, and all kinds of legal writings, and it is mostly about defining people and sites, about finding categories, for example definitions of what a ‚slum‘ is.

C.S.: What else is part of your contribution to Documenta?

RMC(M.N.): The third part is much more portable. It's a series of stickers we have been sticking all over the town of Kassel, and which are meant to be another interface to the city. And the last thing is a 4-page broad sheet, which is again exploring the concepts that I have been talking about.

C.S.: What do the stickers say?

RMC(M.N.): You do not just speak about the city, but the city also talks back to you. You find all kinds of things: job offers, promises of sexuality, ... We are trying to take some of those, and echo back what the city is saying. When we came here, we saw the graffiti Kassel has; it is always the same kind of text everywhere, either an expression of rebellion and anger, or it is advertising. And we wanted to add something different: texts which have the notion of control.

C.S.: Could you give an example?

RMC(M.N.): "Be careful. Abandoned objects might contain explosive devices." Something we were living with in Delhi for a long time. No matter where you go in the city, you have these "Don't pick up anything", "Don't do this", "Don't do that" all over the place. Now, if somebody leaves a bag and goes off, everyone's first response is not, "Shit, he forgot his bag", and tell him/her, but "Shit, maybe there's something inside that might blow up." It really becomes a condition of fear, that you live in, all the time.

Another very typical expression is "The situation is tense, but under control." Whenever something happens in the country, like a riot, communal riot, or some kind of violent situation in the city, the typical reaction of the government is: "The situation is tense, but under control." And you know it is an euphemism for everything.

For us, and many other people it became a kind of idiom... When something is not working, or when you have serious problems, you say "The situation is tense, but under control".

Another slogan is “Do not be afraid of the discharge of dreams. Help is at hand”. - (Talking about your personal sexuality is difficult, if you are afraid of wet dreams. Don’t worry. We can take care of this.) It is a promise... These are the kind of texts we are using. 18 different stickers, four different languages: English, Hindi, Turkish, and German.

Here in Kassel we went to north town which is a more Turkish area, where Thomas Hirschhorn (2) has also worked, and all the kids loved the stickers, and asked for more.

C.S.: Did they talk back already?

RMC(M.N.): Yes, they did, in their way. The way they used the stickers is very interesting: They made patterns, sometimes the Hindi is upside down, as they cannot read it, or they sort them by colours, or they did cut outs, and the things they make out of them do no longer look like the stickers did. That’s fun. If you go to Thomas Hirschhorn’s work in north town now, you will find a lot of what the kids did with our stickers.

C.S.: Now I would like to take a closer look at the two main parts of your work. First the installation. It consists of three screened videos; next to one screen we have a kind of board with the stickers again, on the floor we can see a projected map ...

RMC(M.N.): The name of the piece is “28°28” N / 77°15” E : An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life” (3). The numbers are the latitude and longitude of Delhi. We are very located in our city. It is the basis of our work. All what we do, and how we do it has to do with the place. At the same time, we are not just talking about Delhi. We are working on general questions like “What is land”, “What is a slum”, “Who is an encroacher”. These are categories which can be used, and worked with all over. We could do a similar thing for example here in Kassel, or in Berlin. That’s why we decided not to use the name of a place, but the coordinates.

And the projected map on the floor is a satellite image of Delhi. The idea was to place people physically in or on Delhi. It is meant to be walked on, although nobody is doing so.

C.S.: Because of the aura of the art work.

RMC(M.N.): Yes, seems so. They all think It’s art, and one should not step on art. And when WE do so, people give us dirty glances, like “What are you doing there?”.

C.S.: Back to the projections. One is text only. You have mentioned above it is excerpts of legal rulings?

RMC(M.N.): Yes, it is extracts from legal cases, and we were focussing on definitions, for example “What is land?”. It is a series of definitions of how land is looked at. Then the Delhi masterplan. How does the masterplan imagine the city? Then it moves on to “What is a slum?”, looking at that category. At the end we have extracts from a municipal log book which contains for example the numbers of demolition houses, of trees planted, that kind of thing. Then it moves on to extracts from people who make masterplans, and judgements on how the city should be looked at. There you realize the constant increase of the numbers of bans, and also the increase in the degree of hardness.

C.S.: What do the other screens show? Are the three projections in sync?

RMC(M.N.): One screen shows the arrival in the city by train. Trains are very important in India, the primary means of transport, because they are affordable and you can get anywhere by train. In our video, the train is constantly moving. Train is a metaphor for movement into urban space, it symbolizes the moment of becoming migrant — another person who has to be located within the city by the plan. The selection of the images also stands for what seduces people to come into that space, the city at night, the transmission of signals, transactions of information, the commerce with data. And the soundscape of this movement is also a very important part of the installation.

The third screen is about everyday life in the city, about walking and working, about demolition. There are images that you see from spaces that have been demolished, as well as from a space that might be demolished. At Sarai, we have been working together with an NGO called Ankur for more than a year now in the Cybermohalla Cyber-Neighbourhood Project, which is based around working with young people in a free software digital lab in precisely such a space - a squatter settlement in the centre of the city. There are constant rumours that the whole settlement will be demolished. So we know how rumor is present in the field of demolition. You can see some images from that settlement on this screen.

And you see images from another place - the “re-settlement” colony, which has been constructed by the city authorities for those who already have been evacuated from “illegal” spaces that have been demolished. As you can see quite clearly, it is not as if this space that is held out as the promise (of ‘re-settlement’) is a space where that promise really meets fulfillment. For some people it is important to leave because they get some land. But that’s only for a few. And the way the space is imagined and realized is very grid like. The new space is completely different from where people are coming from. They are forced to leave a settlement and come into an empty map, an abstract grid.

So the piece is mostly about space, and legality, about what is legal and what is not. What you can do, and how you can negotiate. And the three screens are not in sync. This constantly produces new constellations, and new associations.

C.S.: I am wondering why you have chosen the format of a video installation. So far you have worked as film makers, and now presenting at an art exhibition you are using a new format, a format which has a lot of tradition within the arts. Did you think this format would better fit the needs of the white cube which in fact very often is a black cube at this show?

RMC(M.N.): We have always been working in film, that's true. The thing about film is that it is linear, and there has always to be an argument which starts somewhere, and ends somewhere. What we do in the installation is using arguments which are not resolvable, they do not end somewhere. The fact that you are simultaneously inhabiting the legal scene, the everyday life of work, the seduction of and the transport to the city, makes a difference. And you do not see all three screens at the same time. You have to move, physically, in the installation, between the screens. We wanted people to keep moving while they are in the installation.

C.S.: After having worked as film makers for a long time, you now have been invited to the legendary art show ,Documenta', and you make a video installation for the show. I was wondering if the invitation probably changed your self-conception. Did you turn into artists?

RMC(M.N.): I don't care much about calling myself an artist. I consider myself to be a media practitioner. I work with film, with text, with space, with the internet. I have done that before, and I will go on doing it. You can call me whatever you want to, and I will use whatever I want to in order to say what I have to say. For example with OPUS, the other project we have here, the medium we use is the Internet. The work is about creating a digital commons, which is not, or maybe not yet, determined by masterplans. It is about all of us putting something in, and being allowed to use it.

C.S.: We'll go into detail with this immediately. But before, I would like to ask another art question, sorry, when I am boring you... Does it have any relevance for you to present your work at Documenta? And if yes, in what way? As I've said before, Documenta is THE legendary art show, one of the biggest in the world, and certainly the one with most prestige—all of this, of course, in reference to the western oriented art system, and art market.

RMC(M.N.): We really do not know so much about what you refer to as the art system or the art market, (here, or in India) we have not had to have a relationship with it till now. If we were to talk about Documenta in India, most people would ask what Documenta was. For most people there it does not really matter. I personally had heard about it, but it certainly is not something I had been dreaming of doing. What it is for us now, is that it's a space, and one where we see that there are a lot of people coming.

C.S.: It is exactly 640,000 people expected to come in the next one hundred days ...

RMC(M.N.): Yes, it will be crowded.

C.S.: For me, reflecting the space where I am, where I operate, is also part of my work. As an artist, it is the art system which I am interested in. I cannot see Documenta hall, for example, just as a neutral space where I would install my work. It is part of a complex operating system. In that sense I would like to know what your reference to this operating system is. Although Documenta 11 is meant to break with traditional standards, and open up in various ways, it nevertheless stands in the tradition of modernism. And other Documentas before had similar ideas in terms of opening up. Do you care about the history of a western coined understanding of art? Or are you just happy to take the opportunity to enter the changing field at this point, to become part of it, and be able to “say what you have to say”?

RMC(S.S.): The term ,western‘ is problematic for us in the sense that ,the west‘ is part of our history, and we always know more about Europe and North America than Europe and North America knows about us. And the history of Europe is closely related to our history. We are entangled in it, and are conscious of our entanglements. Perhaps what you refer to, as the ,western oriented art system‘ is not aware of the extent of this entanglement, (with European history and culture) even though it

has very little, or nothing to do with our relationship, or lack of it with the art system of art market here. Anyway, it is very difficult for us to keep to the categories ,east‘ and ,west‘, as concepts to work with. I think philosophically they do not reflect back on these complex connectivities.

RMC(M.N.): I think there have been a lot of important influences for us coming from the tradition you refer to. Often it is not there as the original but as some form of popular reproduction, earlier available very cheaply. But we basically come from a film background. And persons we were fascinated with, and who have been influential for us were Harun Farocki, and Hartmut Bitomski, for example. When we were film students this was really exciting work to look at. And it definitely had an influence on us. Thinking about the essay form of film making helped us a lot in the evolution of our own work. And I think you can see this more directly in the intellectual as opposed to the visual or formal content of our work. Visually, I don't think that we have any direct influence from a classical, canonically European tradition, or from any other tradition for that matter, except the certain relationship to the history of the documentary image, in film and in photography, because of our training and our earlier work background.

And because we are not what you would regard as mainstream artists, we haven't thought about it in that sense, in the sense of locating ourselves vis-a-vis the canon of 'European', or 'Western' Art. In a way one could call our aesthetics improvisational, on the other hand it developed through our dialogic way of working, which makes us very sure about what we do.

We don't really care where it is coming from, it might come from half way across the world, or it might spring from under our feet, and both can be valid. One thing is for sure, certainly we know more about the west and western thinking and tradition than people over here know about us.

C.S.: I would like to know how you perceive the western dominated art system, because as I see it, it is clearly driven by certain most of all economic motives. It is a rigid, highly exclusive, hierarchical system, which only opens up, and changes rules when it can profit itself.

RMC(S.S.): We pirate it. We claim it as our own. As I said earlier, we are outside, and we are entangled. We claim all the problems, all the tragedy of European Modernity. They are tragedies to think about, and there are also all the elements which we would celebrate as part of an open, democratic, critical culture. Whenever I have read European philosophy, I never have thought that it is different from the questions that we have to address. However, of course it is different...

And in terms of presenting our work at Documenta 11, it is a predicament of dealing with something that is both, strange and familiar. Some of the the works shown (not the new ones, but the works of well known artists) here are the works we always have known about from the side lines).

C.S.: This Documenta celebrates itself particularly for having opened the rigid western-centered art system to a multitude of geographical, ethnical, and political voices.

RMC(S.S.): What is particularly good about this show is that there is a lot of works and practices which are not 'high art', not the mainstream of art production. And from what I can say, the reason why people from different parts of the world contribute to this show is not only because they are from different parts of the world. I mean, some of the work may be here because of a certain geographically representational imperative. A certain expectation of what a ,transnational' cultural space 'ought' to be imagined as. But I find it odd that this 'anxiety about representation, and debates about inclusion/exclusion' is something that is visible, or talked about, only now. After all, the history of Documenta, one could argue, is about post second world war Europe (and North America) representing itself, to itself. The same 'representational anxiety and debates about inclusion/exclusion' could, retrospectively be factored back into any discussion of the history of Documenta itself.

But apart from that, there's works, like for instance Tsunami.net from Singapore, that is interesting in and of itself. It only coincidentally comes from Singapore.

C.S.: What I have read in the German newspaper DIE ZEIT this morning was a critic saying:

"... What happened is that, unintentionally, this Documenta even intensified the colonial patterns, because now Documenta became desirable for people who did not even know about

its existence before. Now, also artists from New Delhi and Lagos declare an invitation to Kassel to be the goal of their career.” (4) Do you share this estimation?

RMC(S.S.): First of all, I am not even sure what an artist is. We are called artists, so I think we have to accept it responsibly, but still it is strange for us. I guess we are more interested in thinking through practices in many forms, and art practice is one of the forms, but not everything. And I carry an Indian passport, but I doubt that the word ,Indian‘ means more than that to me. It is the name of a nation state, and I do not believe in nation states. I am a person who works in a collective, and lives in a city called Delhi.

C.S.: Going back to the question, what this critic wanted to say, I guess, is that what happened in Delhi for example was not part of the discussion ,here‘, it was not included in the reference system of the western art world. And the other way round, what Documenta was showing was not part of the discussion amongst Indian artists...

RMC(S.S.): Let me try and answer this as best as I can. I think what is happening ‘here’ in this show, is an attempt at trying to understand a very complex and a very difficult moment in the world’s history. When many people in different parts of the world are trying to simultaneously think through different images of a world in crisis. The image of the world from Lagos, and the image of the world from Berlin are adjacent to each other, and they are addressing each other. This is quite different from the history of inter-cultural dialogue till now. Until now, some parts of the world, the “metropolises” of global culture spoke, others listened, and if their turn came to speak, the ,others‘, be they in New Delhi, or Rio De Janeiro, or Minsk could speak about their corners, their ,specific’ histories. While the artist from Paris, or New York, or Berlin, or Tokyo was at liberty to be as specific, as local, or as global in the sweep of his or her address.

This Documenta changes that equation. Now, we find that the artwork, or the artist whose antecedents are in Lagos or New Delhi, also offers a picture of the world, or a metaphor with which to think through the world, just as the one from New York does. We can debate elsewhere about whether these pictures of the world are adequate,

whether or not they are incisive, or satisfying as per any other criterion, but we have to admit to the fact that the Documenta this time compels you to encounter that what Enwezor calls the “Will to Globality” is not the preserve, or the patrimony of the Western European, North American, or Trans-Pacific cultural practitioner alone.

That there can be conflicting, parallel, tangential, entangled, wills to globality, in the plural. We see this Documenta as a response to this situation. And the plurality of “wills to globality” can be confusing for someone, say in Europe, or North America, who is accustomed to thinking that they alone have the cognitive breadth that can create an imaginary that embraces the whole world. Their may be some transmission loss going on here, an artist say in South America is actually offering a picture of the world, whereas a person in Europe is reading it, or wishes to read it, as only a fragment that encompasses only a specific locale.

RMC (M.N.): Once we face this fact, then the question of the ,relevance‘ of the Documenta to the person in New Delhi, or the relevance of the discussion in New Delhi for this Documenta has to be fundamentally re-thought. I think a relevance exists, both ways, because the predicaments that the Documenta is trying to address are very much present in New Delhi, which is a city as entangled as any other in the global economic, political or cultural matrix. There may be artists in New Delhi who are not prepared to encounter this fact, but I am sure that there are insular artists in Berlin, who don’t want to recognize the world that they live in today. In that case, this Documenta would be just as irrelevant for either party.

In any case, the question of the relevance or worth only comes up, curiously, when the movement (between spaces) is that of cultural workers, or cultural objects. One could ask, why is it quite acceptable for software engineers, scientists, academics, bankers and economists to circulate back and forth between, say New Delhi and Frankfurt, or New Delhi and Los Angeles, without having their credibility or their bona fides questioned in either location. But, somehow, when it comes to artists, or cultural workers, we must always interrogate the notions of authenticity, relevance and the intrinsic worth of the movement in space of meanings and meaning makers. It is as if artists, art practitioners and boat people or refugees and asylum seekers are the only kinds of people who must prove the ‘real’ worth of their movement (for themselves and for everyone else), once they arrive at any place not ordinarily considered to be their own ‘home ground’...

RMC (S.S): In any case (laughing), when we go back we will no longer be artists, as we are not considered to be ‘artists’ in India. But as people who happen to live in one of the most interesting cities in the world, we think that this Documenta does address the world that we live in, and that we have been able to dialogue with our city, in our work in this Documenta.

C.S.: So you did not become an artist now, by mistake?[laughs]

RMC(S.S.): I think we have to use the term art and artist very responsibly, like to be responsible for the idea of our practice, which is different from saying “I am an artist”. Of course, one of the arenas in which our products circulate is that of art. But when tomorrow someone calls me a writer, a person in literature, I will wonder if they are talking to the person next to me, but I do understand that I will also have to be responsible to this arena. Because for the kind of practice we do, it would be foolish to say that we do not want to enter this domain. Of course we want to enter, because we want to intervene in it, say something, create a space which is meaningful. In that sense we are artists. But many people who are part of the art world in India may consider us as interesting outsiders, but may or may not wish to consider us as insiders. I think it is entirely up to other people what they wish to call us. The only thing we can do is being responsible to the kind of practice we are doing. Coming from a film making background, this question actually never ceases to surprise us, if you make a film, what is talked about is the film, not whether or not you are the kind of person who can be considered to be a filmmaker. People from all kinds of background enter filmmaking, and that is seen as quite natural, no one has any anxiety about this fact.

C.S.: I agree, but what is different for me is, that I am coming from an art background. And although I am working hard to open the field of art to various, also political practices, I have always found it important to consciously protect the territory of art, and make sure that it will go on to exist.

RMC(M.N. & S.S.): We agree that the autonomy and freedom of artistic work is something to insist on, especially at a time when there are a lot of institutional and corporate pressures and enticements to create one kind of work or another. And also when artists may find it increasingly difficult to use certain materials or approach certain subjects for fears of violating the increasingly powerful apparatus of intellectual property.

In this sense, the best safeguard for the autonomy of the arts lies in art practices locating themselves (and by extension arguing for all culture to be placed) solidly in the public domain.

We think however, that it is equally important to recognize that artmaking is a social practice, that it does not happen outside of the social - outside of interpersonal, ethical, gender and class inflected realities, and that it has always a relationship to communities of practitioners and audiences that form around the making, viewing, interpretation and circulation of an art object). We cannot abstract art as a purely 'formal' activity, outside of this matrix of lived experience and realities. And just as we now rightly subject science and technology to all kinds of questions and ethical scrutinies, so too we cannot insist on a different set of standards for anyone who takes upon themselves the role of the artist, or has it thrust upon them.

This is not to compromise the autonomy of the arts, but to see that autonomy as grounded in the matrix of our social being. It means, for instance, that there is a difference that we would like to insist on between making art that articulates, or gives voice to a politics, on the one hand, and making art politically on the other.

In a climate where there might be an insistence on some kind of 'Socialist Realist' aesthetic, the choice on the part of an artist to work only and rigorously with non-figurative abstraction is not a purely formal one, it carries with it a definite political sensibility. Similarly, to work with narrative in a climate that invests heavily in say 'abstract expressionism' (as CIA fronted cultural organizations did in the days of the cold war) is again not simply an aesthetic decision.

So, if someone is working within New Media practice, the question of which kind of software one uses, whether or not it is proprietary, and about the protocols that the artist inscribes into his/her work to govern the circulation of his/her work — all of these are questions that have formal implications, and they say a lot about the way the artist sees himself/herself and his/her work in relation to society, to communities, and to different fields of power. To say in the instance of new media, at least, that one's work is innocent and untouched by anything other than one's own pristine individual creativity is to suffer an illusion.

C.S.: Let's then have a look at your internet project "OPUS". (5)

RMC(M.N.): The idea for the project is taken from the Free Software principle. In Free Software anyone can download something, modify, customize it, whatever you want, and again distribute and share it. And we were wondering if it will work as a methodology also for cultural production. The project is an experiment to find out. And the other aspect is the idea of the commons, which is a traditional idea. Everyone is familiar with it. The digital commons has been talked about a lot. And it is what the whole of the internet is about, to collectively put in and to take out. But we are afraid that under a certain pressure the system will be more controlled. That's why we decided to create a space where people could voluntarily put their work, keep authorship for their work, so that whatever you put there, photo, sound, text, you always have a sense of who created the work. The names of the authors will always be there. And then you open the source, the material for use.

C.S.: As I can read on the website OPUS stands for "Open Platform for Unlimited Signification", and in Latin, the word ,Opus' also means a work or a creation. In the case of OPUS - the creation would be the platform you have built?

RMC (S.S.): OPUS is both the software or the application as the 'work' that we have created, as well as the space where others can create their own "Opuses". It is a work for the making of work.

C.S.: Is it also possible for users of "Opus" to influence the platform itself, or are they just allowed to upload and download material?

RMC (M.N.): Well the code for the application itself is also freely available, and people can modify and improve it, and take it to create their own rescension of the platform, of OPUS itself.

C.S.: You try to transfer the principle of open source and free software to cultural products. In the field of software the idea is to make the code behind the user interface visible, useable, changeable. What would correspond to the level of code in software in the field of cultural production?

RMC (M.N.): I think the correspondence has to be seen at the level of a translation, and that too a translation into practice. The point is not to find some kind of platonic correspondence of ideas, but to see what forms of practice best apply to the project of an open creativity.

Having said that, the question of "what corresponds to code in culture" might be best understood by an analogy with language. Those who share a language in common share an

alphabet, a vocabulary and a set of grammatical principles. The language grows by sharing vocabularies with other languages it comes into contact with. It also

grows because more people either invent words or find new usage for existing ones. It also grows with each new text, which enriches the expressive possibilities of the language. Here the finitude of the alphabet, which is shared, is in no way a barrier on the infinite growth possibility of the language itself. The process of combining alphabets to form words, of combining words to form texts, allows for infinite play.

We want to see the field of cultural production played out along similar lines. The images, sounds, objects and texts that comprise this field can be seen as an alphabet with which we and others can then fashion a growing number of interlinked expressions. Of course these objects were created, but then so was the alphabet, and that arbitrary list of sounds and marks that we have grown accustomed to calling words. No one thinks twice about using say the word ‚zany‘ which is said to have been coined by Shakespeare, in different contexts, and to stand for a variety of meanings. Why should this freedom, which we accept in one part of cultural production, not be something that we can accept in other areas?

This freedom was actually taken for granted in oral culture, and we know for instance that stories, imagery units, and narrative fragments cross fertilized constantly across large bodies of what is called epic material, in an almost hypertextual way. In South Asia, you grow up knowing the stories of the ‚Mahabharata‘ - an epic poem, and you accept that stories and characters, the code if you like, travel between different rescensions, quite easily and without a problem.

C.S.: In the field of software, the big ideal behind open source and free software is an emancipatory approach to technology, independence from industrial monopolies and economic independence. What is the ideal behind “free cultural products”. What elementary changes to you expect?

RMC (M.N & S.S): Well, an independence from industrial and institutional monopolies in culture would be a good place to start thinking about the ideal behind ‚free culture‘. If you look at the way the activity of filmmaking is heavily dependent on big studios, or state subsidies today, it means that the possibility of an ‚independent‘ film practice (notwithstanding the possibilities opened up by digital technology) are fraught with difficulties. A culture that gave due importance to the ways in which creative activity can be shared, or made open, would in the long run be more beneficial for independent creativity.

Further, the act of creating culture involves many inheritances, many kinds of participation even in the process of the creation of a single artwork. The discipline of art history would be without work if we could not trace the ways in which works enter and inhabit each other, leave traces on one another, over time. If this be the case, it becomes difficult to sustain the notion of the bounded ‚individual‘ creator of an art work. We don’t have the cultural vocabulary to fully account for this form of ‚unbounded‘ authorship, and we think that one of

the ideas behind working through the idea of 'free cultural products' is to actually build a conceptual framework for the concrete, existing reality of such authorship.

Finally, we think that the production of signs, on which so much rests at present, ought to be a field far more open for contestation and interpretation than it is now. If, for instance, you are constantly confronted by the sign for this or that commodity, it could be said that you are creating some kind of 'value' that adds to the sign with every instance of attention that you give to that sign. Once you admit to that, then if you are the kind of person who believes that people should have some degree of control over what happens to their own labour power, you will see how important it is that the whole area of signification, the making and remaking of signs be more open, and more contested.

You could say that at a broad level, these could be some of the ideas behind 'free cultural products' as we see them. Of course, others may see the process quite differently.

As for what elementary changes we expect, we are certain that in the days to come the whole domain of intellectual property, disputes around what is or is not in the public domain, will play a very important role in the shaping of culture. It has already begun at the level of popular culture - all the battles about copyright, peer to peer distribution of music are pointers in the direction that art is bound to have to reckon with in the near future. We feel that there may be attempts for a certain convergence of position between the industrial and the institutional structures that govern the production of signs, weighed in the favour of a stricter intellectual property regime. All those involved in art practice will have to negotiate and fight for greater autonomy and one of the ways they can do this is by creating the frameworks of a visual and a meaning making culture based on principles other than those of ownership and originality. This is actually not a question of some whimsical apology for free software, but of defending the very autonomy of art practice that you had referred to in an earlier question.

C.S.: For the software of the OPUS platform you use the gpl (General Public Licence), whereas you create a new licence for the cultural products being exchanged on the platform. What in your licence is specific and different from the software licence?

RMC(M.N.): You are right, we created our own licence, the 'Opus Licence', together with a lawyer, Lawrence Liang. He is based in Bangalore, and he is currently researching the cultural implications of intellectual property on a fellowship with Sarai.

Well the crucial reason why we felt that we needed a new licence was to protect works within the OPUS domain, as well as OPUS itself, from 'third party liability' cases, and to protect OPUS from the possibility of works within it infringing the various laws (in different countries) that make a host, even an ISP, liable for the content of any thing that they carry.

CS : Do you think it would make sense and it is possible to work on a general copyleft licence for cultural products, in order to make it more attractive for users to work with it? The confusing legal situation seems to deter a lot of people at the moment.

RMC(S.S.): The whole field of ,free cultural material‘ is at present at a very young, experimental stage. A lot of things will have to be tried out, a lot of situations encountered, and a lot of legal as well as artistic creativity will have to be exercised to create a greater common space before we can come to any general conclusions about what is or is not desirable. In fact, there may be a strong argument in favour of retaining a diversity of licenses, both to allow for greater choice, and also to account for the many different kinds of legal and practice based paradigms of thinking about authorship.

This is not to say that we should not evolve a simpler understanding of what ,Copyleft‘, for instance, might entail. In general terms, yes, we could say that it implies a certain underlying commitment to the idea of the Public Domain. But then the ,Public‘ that constitutes the Public Domain may be inflected quite differently in different instances, and a diversity of licenses would help respond to these specificities.

CS: Is there any material up already? Can we have a look at something?

RMC(M.N.): It has just started to fill up. The first thing we have put there is some of the material for the video we have here, basically images and texts from what you see in the “Co-Ordinates” installation.

C.S.: How did you build the platform?

RMC(M.N.): Using MySQL and php.

C.S.: Do you know sourceforge.net, the exchange platform for open and free software? Was it probably an inspiration for OPUS?

RMC(M.N.): The programmers that we worked with on OPUS, Pankaj and Silvan, were both familiar with sourceforge.net, and there are strong similarities, particularly in the way in which both systems use CVS. But the concept which really animates OPUS is that of the rescension.

A rescension is either a re-arrangement of an existing text, or a re-working of an existing text, incorporating new materials, and/or deleting some old ones, or a new edition with a

substantive commentary or annotation. A recension is neither a clone, nor an authorised or pirated copy nor an improved or deteriorated version, of a pre-existing text. Just as a child is neither a clone, nor an authorised or pirated copy, nor an improved or deteriorated version of its parents. We have been working with this idea, and trying to see what it implies for a different ethic of cultural production for quite some time, and you can see the seeds of it in a text we wrote called the Concise Lexicon of/for the Digital Commons.

So in a sense, it is this working with the idea of the rescension that could be said to be the 'inspiration' behind OPUS.

C.S.: But let us go back to seeing what is inside OPUS at the moment, here for instance is a whole set of media objects that carry the key word ,barricade'. What does that mean?

RMC(M.N.): Right now, the barricade is an important element inside OPUS, because it contains a lot of material from the "Co-Ordinates" installation. The barricade is a metal barrier, that the police put up to control movement and identification on the streets of Delhi. Since, the work (the installation) is about the way in which space is inflected by legality, the barricade becomes quite an important element in the work.

So here we have an icon for a media object, and the object here is an image of a barricade. When you click on it you get a short description and information about the author and how many people have already downloaded that object. And you have all the 5 keywords, written by the one who uploaded the image, that best describe it.

And if any other object shares a keyword, lets say another instance of the word ,barricade', then the software creates a visual link between the icons for these two objects. This helps you locate an object and its' affinities within the OPUS system.

C.S: How do you communicate OPUS? How do people learn about it?

RMC(M.N.): The plan is to announce it on various lists, and also run workshops, especially with students.

C.S.: You call OPUS an experiment. What would be the ideal outcome or process to happen for you, and in what case would you classify the project as failure?

RMC(M.N.): The ideal outcome or process would be if OPUS were to be used and used intensively by a lot of people as a space to create and show work together with others, if it could lead to a lot of OPUS cousins - other platforms for free and open creativity, and if it

sparked a lively discussion and debate about a new aesthetic and ethic of what it means to have an open, unbounded authorship.

If the work remained at a purely conceptual level, as a good idea that might have had a life, if only people tried it, then obviously we will have failed somewhere in communicating the 'usability' of what many would otherwise agree was a good idea. It is a fragile, living entity, and it will need a lot of people working within it, tending it, helping it grow, in a sociable manner if it is to succeed. Otherwise, like any living being that doesn't get nourishment and care it will die! We think that this predicament is interesting in and of itself. That a piece of work, which some might call art, is entirely dependent on what people do with it, and within it. Any passive reception of OPUS is a guarantee of its failure.

[Addendum, September 4, 2002]

C.S.: Documenta11 is almost over now, and I would like to know how the European art audience has responded to your project. Could you provide any numbers regarding participation, cooperators, uploaded material, etc.?

RMC(M.N.): It is not easy at the moment to make an assessment of the kind of currency that OPUS has got in Europe as a result of Documenta11. Certainly, a lot of people have seen it, and we have had several inquiries about it.

We went back to Documenta in the middle of July for a two day long discussion event around some of the ideas of unbounded authorship. That proved to be quite a lively set of conversations. We had invited Lawrence Liang, the legal researcher who worked on the OPUS license, Nancy Adajania, an art critic and curator from Bombay,

Ravi Sundaram, our colleague at Sarai, and Geert Lovink, new media critic, to debate the implications of the culture of the copy, languages of withholding and the digital commons. We were joined on the panel by Okwui Enwezor and Sarat Maharaj, one of the co-curators for Documenta11. The discussions evoked a lot of response,

there was even a person from an artists copyright agency who had interesting differences with the approach that we were putting forward. I think the level of interest was also quite high partly because in some senses the public of the art world are just beginning to come to terms in a fundamental sense with the cultural and intellectual minefield that lies around the issues of intellectual property, (something that people in new media and digital culture have to deal with all the time), and so a work, and a discussion that focuses attention on this minefield is bound to generate a lot of interest.

Apart from this, there are at least two instances that we know of people who have said that they want to use the code of OPUS to begin working on their own platforms. One from a group of young programmers in London, and another, of a group that intends to work on a collaborative video project in Germany. We also see people putting

up things on the site, so we know that a group of free software enthusiasts in Kassel actually put up some material. Andreas Broeckman at the Transmediale has started a theme. Lev Manovich has written about it in Nettime, as well as elsewhere and intends to start using it to teach to his students. (6) and (7).

Also, there is a group in Recife, Brazil who we discovered were doing “free and shared creation of music” in a project called Re: Combo (8), and they want to work with OPUS as well.

Of course there are still some bugs and teething problems in OPUS, so we are working on smoothening those out, and hopefully, as time goes by, we will see OPUS really come alive.

C.S.: Thank you for the conversation.

Due to Okwui Enwezor, director of Documenta11, the exhibition space should become a space for cultural production, a space for a dialogue between cultures, an interface between the field of cultural production and the public, and a space where global emancipation is practiced instead of cultivating a western oriented, modernist

understanding of art as autonomous field. Along with that goes his wish to go beyond market-driven standards for his show. Raqs Media Collective, working as a collective, being based in a so-called developing country, see their cultural production as contribution to civil society, where it might function as a trigger for social and political developments, and therefore seem to perfectly illustrate Enwezor’s concept.(9)

1)<http://www.fondation-langlois.org/f/projets/346-3-2000/>

2)“Socially mapping the city of Kassel, the Bataille Monument integrates itself actively in the lives of a marginalized local community. Hosted by an evanescent walk-in

container, a heterogenous textual and visual archive on Bataille is diligently constructed with the help of young philosophers and accompanied by Hirschhorn’s own

video documentation with contemporaries...”, Documenta11, short guide

3)Delhi, 2002

4)Hanno Rauterberg, DIE ZEIT 24/2002, translated by C.S.

http://www.zeit.de/2002/24/Kultur/200224_kunstfrage.html

5)<http://www.opuscommons.net>

6) Lev Manovich, Welcome to the Multiplex

<http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0207/msg00003.html>

7) Lev Manovich, Who is the Author? Sampling / Remixing / Open Source

http://www.manovich.net/DOCS/models_of_authorship.doc

8) <http://english.recombo.art.br>

9) die tageszeitung, Interview between Harald Fricke and Okwui Enwezor, June 1, 2002

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